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By

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Valentine
Greetings
To Bob From Ruth

ROUND THE CORNER IN GAY STREET

By GRACE S. RICHMOND

AUTHOR OF

"With Juliet in England," "The Indifference of Juliet," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers *New York*

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TO
MARJORIE, GUERNSEY AND JEAN

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BOOK I. GAY STREET

CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION BY TELEPHONE

THE hour for breakfast at the home of Mr. Harrison Townsend, in Worthington Square, was supposed to be eight o'clock. In point of fact, however, breakfast was usually served from that hour on, until the last laggard had appeared.

The head of the house himself was always promptly on hand at eight. On the morning of April second he had, as usual, nearly finished his breakfast before the door opened to admit a second member of the family. Mr. Townsend raised his eyes as a tall and slender figure limped slowly across the floor.

"Morning, Murray!" he said, and dropped his eyes again to his paper.

"Good morning, sir!" responded his son, and glanced indifferently over the table as he sat down. "Bring me grapefruit and a cup of coffee," he said to the maid. "No, nothing else. Be sure the grapefruit is fixed as I like it."

Mr. Townsend finished his newspaper and his

coffee at the same moment, and rose from the table. Although five minutes had elapsed since the elder of his two sons came into the room, no conversation had passed between them. Mr. Townsend's glance dropped upon the young man, who, with his look of ill health, would have appeared to a stranger to have lived several more than the twenty-three years which were really his.

"You 're not feeling well this morning, Murray?"

"About as usual."

"It 's not strange that you have no strength, when you take nothing substantial with your morning meal."

"How can I, when I can't bear the sight of anything but fruit?"

"You don't get out enough."

"I suppose I don't. There's nothing to take me out."

Mr. Townsend turned away. As he passed through the door, he met his daughter Olive, and greeted her.

This very pretty, dark-skinned, dark-eyed girl of eighteen evidently had been keeping late hours on the previous evening. Her long lashes drooped sleepily over her eyes as she nodded to her brother.

"Grapefruit any good?" she asked.

"Fair, if it was n't sweetened like a bonbon."

"I like mine sweet. Annie, tell Gretchen to put half a dozen maraschino cherries in my grapefruit and some crushed ice."

"You must like the mess that will be," Murray observed.

"I do — very much," replied his sister, decidedly.

The two continued their breakfast in silence, which was presently interrupted by the advent of a fourth member of the family. Forrest Townsend, flinging into the room with a rush, dressed in riding clothes, and casting hat and crop upon a chair as he passed it, offered a picturesque contrast to the two dark-eyed young persons. Of a little more than medium height, strongly built, fair-haired and blue-eyed, he looked the young athlete that he was.

"Hello!" was his morning greeting, as he dropped into a chair. He proceeded instantly to give his directions to the maid. No invalid order was his.

"No — no grapefruit. I want my chop, and some bacon and eggs; tell Gretchen to brown the eggs better than she did yesterday. Muffins this morning? What? Oh bother! You know I hate toast, Annie! Oh, waffles — that 's better! Coffee, of course."

"Sounds like an order you 'd give at a hotel," observed his sister, with scorn. "I wonder Gretchen does n't make a fuss at having to cook a whole breakfast like that just for you. Nobody else wants such a heavy meal at this hour."

"The bigger geese you all are then. If I picked at my breakfast the way the rest of you do, I 'd soon lose this good muscle and wind of mine."

"I never heard that hot waffles and syrup were good for muscle and wind." Murray looked cynical under his dark eyebrows. "They would n't be allowed at any training-table."

Forrest leaned back in his chair and surveyed his brother. "A lot you know about training tables — a fellow who spent his two college years cramming for honours," he said, pointedly. "No wonder you look like a pale ghost on such rations. Here comes mother at last."

Mrs. Harrison Townsend, in a trailing pale blue gown, her fair hair piled high upon her head, came in with an air of abstraction.

"Out late last night?" Forrest asked her, attacking his chop with relish. "A dissipated lot you all look but me. Even Murray would be taken for a chap that got in toward morning. That comes of reading in bed. Now look at me.

I was in after the last of you, and I 'm as fresh as a daisy."

"For a boy not out of his teens your hours strike me as peculiar." Murray rose slowly as he spoke. He glanced at his mother. She was busy with letters she had found at her plate.

Murray limped slowly over to the end of the room, where a great semi-circular alcove, filled with windows, a cushioned seat running round its whole extent, looked out upon the shrubbery and the street beyond. He sank down upon this seat, and gazed indifferently out of the window.

Across the narrow side street which led away from stately Worthington Square into a much less pretentious neighborhood stood a big furniture van, unloading its contents before a small brown house. Although upon the left side of the Townsend place lay a fine stretch of lawn, at the right the house stood not more than ten yards away from the side street. Its present owner had attempted to remedy this misfortune of site by planting a thick hedge and much shrubbery, but a narrow vista remained through which, from the dining-room windows, the little brown house opposite could be seen with the effect of being viewed through a field-glass and brought into close range.

"What 's that over there in Gay Street?" Olive had caught a glimpse of the furniture-van. "New people moving in? Goodness! How many tenants has that house had? They 're always moving out and moving in — nobody can keep track of them."

Mrs. Townsend, looking up from her letter, glanced out in her turn. "There is certainly no need to keep track of them," she observed. "What your Grandfather Townsend could have been thinking of when he built this house on the very edge of such a fine lot ——"

"Grandfather Townsend was a shrewd old man, and had an eye to the sale of lots on the farther side of the house when land got high here," was Forrest's explanation.

Five minutes later he was out of the house and crossing the lawn to the stables — a gay and gallant young figure in his riding clothes. From the window of his own room upstairs Murray watched his brother go, feeling bitterly, as he often did, the contrast between Forrest's superb young health and his own crippled condition, the result of an accident two years before, and the illness which had followed it.

" 'Don't get outdoors enough!' " he said to himself. "I fancy if I could go tearing out of the house like that every morning, jump on

Bluebottle, and gallop off down Frankfort Boulevard I could get outdoor air enough to keep me healthy."

An hour afterward there was a knock at his door, and a child's voice called: "O Murray, may I come in?"

His thirteen-year-old sister Shirley somehow seemed nearer to Murray than any other member of his family. "Come in!" he responded:

"O Murray," the little sister began instantly, "some new people are moving into the little brown house, and there 's a girl just my age! She looks so nice! I 've been watching her. She 's helping wash windows. Oh, please come into the den and let me show you!"

From the "den" it could all be seen. There were two girls on the small porch, each washing a window. The elder girl looked as if she were about eighteen, her abundant curly hair, of a decided reddish brown, being worn low at her neck after the fashion of girls of that age. Even across the street the observers could see that she had a merry face, full of life and colour.

The younger girl, was about Shirley's size, round-faced and sturdy, and apparently of an amiable frame of mind, for having accidentally tipped over her pail, she took the mishap in the jolliest spirit, and throwing back her thick

brown braids of hair, mopped up the swimming porch with lively flourishes.

"I wish we could see 'em closer," suggested Shirley. "They look so nice — don't you think they do? — not a bit like the other people that have lived in that house. I saw their mother, I 'm sure I did, a little while ago — she had the dearest face! Murray, don't you think you 'd like to take a little walk? It would be such fun to go past the house while they 're out there, and they 'd be sure to turn and look, so we could see their faces. Please, Murray! We may not have so good a chance after they get the windows washed."

It was something to do, certainly. Motives of interest for the daily walk upon which the doctors insisted were few, and the older brother gladly followed his anxious young leader out into the spring sunshine. Slowly, Murray's cane tapping their advance, they turned the corner from Worthington Square into Gay Street.

Coming rapidly toward them from the opposite direction was a young fellow of about Murray's age. This youth, looking toward the brown house, gave a low whistle. The girls upon the porch turned and waved their cloths, and the newcomer, making three leaps of the short path to the house, and one jump of the low porch, was with them.

They did not shout, those three, and the elder girl's voice, Murray noted, was delightfully modulated; but he and Shirley were close now, and they could not help hearing the greeting.

"Hard at it already? Everything come? I got off for an hour, and thought I 'd rush up and do what I could."

"That was lovely of you, Pete," said the elder girl. A surreptitious glance from Murray, and a frank stare from Shirley, proved her to possess a very attractive face, indeed, as she smiled at the stoutly built young man before her. "Yes, everything has come, and mother can keep you busy every minute. Window-washing would n't *seem* to come first, but we thought we 'd get at least this little front room in order by night, so that when you all came home——"

Her voice was growing indistinct as the passers-by moved reluctantly on. But the younger girl at this point broke in, and her voice, high and eager like Shirley's own, carried farther:

"O Petey, Jane and I are to have the dearest, littlest room you ever saw, right under the eaves. Jane can't stand up all over, but I can — except close to the wall. It 's so little, Jane thinks we can paper it ourselves. If we can only——"

Here the deeper voice of the youth interrupted, and nothing more was distinguishable. Murray

and Shirley walked on, both, it must be confessed, wishing they had eyes in the backs of their heads.

"Oh, do let's turn and go back!" begged Shirley, with one quick glance behind. But Murray made her keep on to the corner, and then insisted on crossing the street.

"Even now they may guess that we 're watching them," he said. "Don't stare so at them, child."

"But they 're going in. Oh, look,"— she clutched his arm —"there's the mother! I 'm sure she is. Look! Is n't she dear?"

She did look "dear." She was enveloped in an apron, and her sleeves were rolled up to the elbows revealing a pair of round, white, capable arms. Her abundant gray hair rolled and puffed about her face in a most girlish fashion, her bright, dark eyes were set under arching eyebrows, and her face, almost as fresh in colouring as her daughter's, was full of charm.

The young man, laughing, put an arm about her shoulders, and drew her back with him into the house. The two girls, gathering up their pails and cloths, and exchanging low, gay talk, followed, and the door was closed.

The April sunshine suddenly faded out of the narrow side street and left it as commonplace as ever. Yet not quite. Murray and Shirley, gazing across at the dull little brown house,

were longing to enter it. It was quite evident that life of a sort they hardly knew was about to be lived within.

With this new interest to stimulate him, it was perhaps not strange that Murray should have found it rather easier than usual to get out for his afternoon walk, or that it should have ended by a slow progress through Gay Street. There were somehow so few young people he cared for, and the faces of the three he had seen had struck him as so interesting, that he wondered, as he tapped along with his cane, by what means he could learn to know them.

Just as Murray came along the street, the younger of the two girls he had seen opened the door, and holding it ajar, addressed somebody inside in her childishly penetrating voice:

"I 'm going to find a telephone somewhere, Janey, if I have to ring at every door. No — I 'll *tell* them we are n't the sort of people who borrow molasses and telephones and things all the time, but —— Why, I 'll say it 's *very* important — *anybody* would understand about wall-paper not coming and the man waiting. No, I don't suppose they have in such a little house, but it won't do any harm to ask. Of course, across the street they 'd have — but I don't quite —— No, of course I won't, but ——"

She ended an interview which evidently was not proceeding according to her satisfaction by closing the door and running down the steps into the street. Murray wanted very much to speak to her and offer the use of his telephone, but she whisked away so fast he had no time. He walked more slowly than ever, saw her turn away from two Gay Street doors, and then retraced his steps, and met her as she was preparing to ascend the third small porch.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I thought I heard you say something about needing to use a telephone. Won't you please come over and use ours — the house on the corner?"

"Oh, thank you!" She looked relieved "That 's good of you. We hate to bother anybody like this, and Jane — my sister — did n't want me to, but the paper man is waiting, and he 's getting very cross, and we do want to get the dining-room done before night. I 'll go and tell Jane. She 'll have to telephone. I can't — I don't know how!"

She ran into the house, and a moment later the elder sister emerged, and came down to Murray to accept his courtesy.

"It 's very kind of you," she said, as he accompanied her across the street and in at the hedge gate. "To-morrow happens to be a legal

holiday, you know, and the paperer says if he does n't have the right paper this afternoon it will be three days before he can finish."

"That would be an awful bother," Murray declared, "just as you 're getting settled. I 'm glad we 're so near. Come in. This way, please. Take this chair here by the desk. I 'll just wait in the hall and show you the way out."

As he waited, Murray could not help hearing. The business did not seem to be easily accomplished. When his visitor had succeeded in getting the paper house on the telephone she had a very bad time making the man at the other end of the line understand about the mistake in the paper, and when it became plain that he did understand, Jane's surprised little sentences showed that he was a most unaccommodating person, and would not do what she requested.

"You can't do it?" she asked, and Murray observed that with all the trouble she was having her voice did not lose its courteous intonations.

"Not this afternoon *at all?* We are very anxious to get the room settled and the paperer says —— Yes, I know, but it surely was n't our mistake. I beg your pardon — it 's only three o'clock, I think, not four. He says

there 's plenty of time if —— No, I 've nobody to send."

"Look here!" Murray's disgusted voice was at her ear. He was gently attempting to take the receiver away from her. "Let me tackle that person, please."

The next moment Jane was standing beside the desk, her cheeks rosy with a quite reasonable indignation at the treatment she had been receiving from the surly unknown. At the telephone, sat her new acquaintance, sending rapid requests over the wire in a tone which plainly was making somebody attend.

"Not fix up your own mistake to-night — with to-morrow a holiday? Why not? There 's plenty of time. Send by a special messenger, of course, and tell him to be quick. Who 's talking to you? That does n't make any special difference, does it? It may be a small order — I don't see what that has to do with it. Mrs. Bell needs that paper up within half an hour. Yes — well, this is Harrison Townsend's house — Worthington Square, and I 'm telephoning for our friends. What? Oh, you will! Well, thank you! I 'm glad you see your way clear. Yes — half an hour — I say, make it twenty minutes, can 't you, please? Very well." And Murray broke off, and hung up the receiver with an

impatient click which expressed his contempt for a clerk who would hurry up an order for Worthington Square when he would n't do it for Gay Street.

"Idiot!" he remarked.

The girl beside him moved toward the door, smiling. "It was ever so kind of you," she said. "The paper is for the dining-room, and you can guess how it upsets things to have the dining-room in confusion."

"I hope you did n't mind my telling that fellow you were our friends," said Murray, as he accompanied his guest to the door. "Such near neighbours ——"

"Oh, I understood! That was what made it so easy for him to get a messenger! Only — please don't think we ——"

"Yes?" Murray was smiling encouragingly at her.

"It sounds absurd, but — it 's so dreadfully soon to be borrowing telephones ——"

"Or molasses?"

They both laughed. Murray's hand lingered upon the door knob, which at this moment it became timely for him to turn for her. "I could n't help hearing your sister assuring you that she would tell people you never borrowed molasses. I don't see why not. We might need

to borrow it of you some time, but of course if you feel there 's something especially prohibitive about molasses ——"

He knew he was not saying anything brilliant, but it made her laugh again, and laughing is an excellent way of getting over a trying situation.

But he was obliged to open the door for her without delay, for she plainly was not going to be tempted into lingering. She ran down the steps, and he saw her bronze-red hair catch the sunshine as she went. As she reached the bottom he called after her: "I hope you 'll like that paper mighty well when it 's on!"

"Thank you!" he heard her answer, over her shoulder, and he was sure that she was still smiling. It seemed to him reasonably certain that the Bells were pleasant people to know.

CHAPTER II

GAY STREET SETTLES DOWN

TRAMP, tramp, upon the little porch. Peter flung the door wide, and in marched the four male members of the house of Bell. The door opened hospitably at once into the living-room, so that the four were able at a glance to see what had been accomplished, and they immediately gave voice to their surprise. "Hi!" This was fifteen-year-old Rufus's exclamation. "Hi! hi! Hip, hip, hurray-ay!"

"Well, well, they must have worked!" said Peter. "I was up here an hour this morning, and they had n't got further than washing the windows."

"When it comes to hustling work, Mother Bell and corps can't be beaten," declared Ross McAndrew, the cousin of the Bells, a pleasant-faced lad of eighteen.

There was a rush from the rear of the house, and Nancy was upon them — Nancy, the twelve-year-old, with the thick brown braids and the round, bright face. Ross caught her and swung

her up to his shoulder, where she struggled frantically.

"I 'm too old, Ross!" she pleaded, rumpling his curly fair hair in revenge until it stood on end. "Put me down! Put me down at once! O-oh, you 're bumping my head against the ceiling!"

He looked up and laughing swung her gently down. "It is n't a very lofty apartment, is it, Nan? Did it hurt?"

"Only my feelings. Does n't it look nice here? Mother worked at the kitchen, and Jane and I did all this. We wanted it to look like home when you came."

"It does, indeeed. But I must admit I 'm glad mother kept at the kitchen," laughed her father, with a tweak of one fat braid. "It seems too much to expect that we should have a meal to-night in all the disorder, but Peter brought back word this morning that we were to come."

"Indeed you are," said a voice from an inner doorway, and everybody turned. A fresh white apron tied about her trim waist — where did she find it in the confusion? — her beautiful hair in careful order, Mrs. Bell beamed at her big family. "We 've nothing but an Irish stew for you, but we had it on this morning as soon as the fire was built, and it 's tender and fine."

"Good for you! We like nothing better. Where's Janey?"

"In the kitchen, trying to make places for you all at the kitchen table. We could n't do anything with the dining-room. The paperer has only just gone."

"Come on, you people!" called a blithe voice from the next room, and Jane's face looked over her mother's shoulder. "Turn to the right as you come through the door, and follow the wall round. I 've made a passage that way, but you 're likely to get into perilous places if you try to steer for yourselves."

In single file they followed directions, all but young Rufus, who preferred leaping from box to barrel, and from table to trunk, and so reached the haven of the kitchen first.

"*Whoo-p!*" he ejaculated. "Say, but this is jolly! *Mm-m!* Smell that stew? Hope you 've lots of it?"

"All you can eat," responded Jane, confidently. "Now if you 'll let me seat you all, I 'll make a place for every one. Mother to go first, at the other end, in the chair — our only one available as yet. Next, Ross, on the cracker-box, and Nan on the wood-box. Daddy's to have this soap-box all to himself, with a cushion on it. Peter can sit on that coal-hod, turned upside down."

There was a roar at this, and a protest from Peter. "Can't I have a newspaper to pad the top of it, sis?"

"If you will find one," Jane responded, unmoved. "Rufe will have to take the top of that flour-barrel, and we 'll hand up his things."

Mrs. Bell was a famous cook, and understood well the quantity of food necessary to appease the keen appetites of her big family, so the bowls were replenished again and again, until all were satisfied, and still the kettle was not quite empty.

"You 're not much like a girl I saw to-day, Janey," remarked Peter, balancing himself in the attempt to sit comfortably back upon his coal-hod, while his sister removed the plates and set forth a dish of baked apples and cream. Peter laughed at the recollection. "She was too stately and languid to lift her eyes to look at me, after the first frosty glance. We rode up town on the same street car yesterday, when I was coming here to make sure the house was ready for us. It was the rush hour, of course, and I gave her my seat. I think — yes, I really think"—Peter paused to reflect — "she said, 'Thank you,' though since of course I was n't looking at her as I took off my hat I did n't see her lips move. She and I got off the car together, and came up Gay Street together ——"

"Together!" from Jane.

"On opposite sides of the street. She was a little ahead, for the car stopped on her side. I looked across at her with interest as I came along — wanted to find out what our neighbors were like, you know. She was carrying a big muff, and had some things in it — been shopping, of course. Oh, I don't mean parcels — she would n't be caught carrying a parcel — but letters and a purse and a card-case and a pocket-handkerchief, and so forth. Well, as we came along I noticed she had dropped something — handkerchief, by the way it fluttered down. Of course I bolted across the street, through six inches of spring mud, grasped the article, and rushed after her. I said, 'Pardon me, but you dropped your handkerchief,' and held it out. She took it, murmured 'Thank you!'— I saw her lips move this time — and sailed on like a queen. I took off my hat, waded back through the mud, and was continuing on my thankless way ——"

"Thankless! — I thought you just admitted she thanked you," objected Ross, with a twinkle.

"It was one of those thankless thank-yous, just the same," explained Peter, with gravity. "Well, as I say, I went on — like this story — meditating upon her cordial manner, when I

saw something else fall from the capacious muff."

"You did n't!" Jane looked incredulous.

"Pardon me, I did. This time I did *not* bolt across the street; indeed, I stopped to consider whether I should not shout, 'Hi, hi, there, you 've dropped your purse, lady!' like a street gamin. But reflecting on the embarrassment this might cause me at some future date, when she and I should really meet, I picked my way across again, seized the pocketbook, and was about to pursue her, when she looked round and caught me in the act of scrutinizing it, as one naturally does upon picking up a gold-mounted, aristocratic affair like that, the like of which he expects never ——"

"Oh, go on!" Rufus could no longer endure his brother's tantalising eloquence.

"I hastened to her side," continued Peter, who was gifted in the art of putting things elaborately when he chose, "and remarked, 'I believe this is yours?' She — now what, friends, would you naturally expect a girl to do on receiving the third favour from a stranger within fifteen minutes?"

"What did you expect? Did you suppose she would fly into your ——"

"Did you want her to open the pocketbook

and hand you a quarter, saying, 'Here, my honest lad ——' "

"Think she 'd say, 'You must call and see father. He will give you a position in his ——' "

"Your suggestions are far-fetched and improbable. I expected none of these things to happen. But consider the situation. Here was I, crossing the street for the third time in the mud ——"

"Go on!"

"Would n't you have thought, considering the absurdity of the affair — her strewing things along the street like that — the least she could have done would have been to ——"

"Smile!" supplied Jane. "*Did n't* she, Peter?"

"She did not," avowed Peter. "She just looked at me as if she thought I had been about to steal her purse, took it, and went on, this time without saying thank you!"

"Good gracious!" This from Ross. "She must be a nice girl to know. And you look pretty well, too, Pete, in that blue suit."

"Where does she live?" Nancy inquired, her round face sympathetic with Peter's mock humiliation.

"In the big house across the street. If you get out of milk or eggs, Janey, don't hesitate to run across and borrow some," counselled Peter.

"Now if you 'll just make use of us all this

evening," proposed Mr. Bell, rising, "we can accomplish a good deal — eh, boys? Shall I open the boxes and barrels, Martha?"

At this suggestion three more pairs of strong arms were put at Mrs. Bell's service. She set every one at work at once.

"Yes, Joe, dear," she agreed, "if you will open the boxes, I 'll take out the things and put them in place as far as I can. That's right, Nancy, you help Jane with the dishes, and when they are done you can go up stairs and make up the beds. Ross and Peter ——"

"Yes, we 'll set up the beds," said Peter, with alacrity, anticipating the division of work, "and uncrate the chests of drawers and the bedroom furniture generally. Come on, Ross. You 're as much one of the family as any of us now, since you helped us move, and a little family labour like this will complete the job. Whoever lives with us has to learn to be handy man about the house."

"I 'm ready." Ross looked it. There was an air of alertness about him, for he was slimmer and lighter than Peter, and his fair curly hair made him appear much younger, although only two years separated the ages of the cousins.

"You will find the furniture mostly in the rooms where it belongs," Mrs. Bell called after them. "Jane will be up soon and straighten

you out, if you get mixed. Rufus, suppose you go round after the others and bring away all the litter they leave after the uncrating, and make a neat pile of it in the wood-shed."

The steep and narrow little staircase ascended abruptly between walls from the dining-room and led to low-ceiled regions above, which, to the eyes of Murray and Shirley Townsend, from the big house across the street, facing Worthington Square, would have seemed too cramped and small of dimensions to be habitable, to say nothing of the possibility of their ever being made comfortable. But the Bells were of the sort who make the best of everything, and so far none of them had suggested that the little house was not an abode fit for the finest.

"Jane and Nan in one room, Rufe and I in another, and Mr. Ross McAndrew alone in state in this little one in the corner. I judge by the signs that's the stowing of the crowd intended," speculated Peter, surveying each room in turn.

"That corner room's as big as any. I don't think I ought to have it all to myself," objected Ross.

"What, not that spacious eight-by-nine apartment, with one whole side under the eaves?" laughed Peter. "Well, since we can't split ourselves into halves, and like the family of the

famous poem 'we are seven,' I don't see but you 'll have to make the best of your loneliness. The beds are only three-quarters size, and Rufe takes up less room than you do, so he and I naturally chum it."

"All right. Let's make a start. Catch hold of that bureau, and heave it around into place."

They fell to work with a will. Ross, the more lightly built, showed the greater energy of the two, though Peter worked away quite as steadily. But after an hour of hard labour Peter called a halt.

"Oh, let's put it through," and Ross bent over a box with undiminished ardour.

His attitude appealed to Peter, spoiling for fun after a long day at the factory, and in a twinkling he had tipped his cousin head first into the nearly empty box. Shouts, laughter and a lively scuffle ensued—so lively a scuffle, indeed, that Mr. Bell, Jane and Nancy, in the dining-room below, energetically sweeping up the litter made by the paperer, smiled at one another in mock dismay as the floor above resounded with the pounding and scraping of boot-heels, and the very walls of the small house trembled with the fray.

"Goodness, I should think it was elephants up there!" cried Nancy, and ran half-way up the stairs to see what was going on.

Mr. Bell opened his mouth to say, "Tell them it's an old house, Nan, and the ceiling's cracked"—when the thing happened.

The ceiling was old, the house was not too solidly built, and the battle above had reached its height when, quite without warning, down upon the freshly cleaned floor fell a great mass of plaster. The powdery lime rose in a suffocating cloud and covered Jane and her father with dust and *débris*.

It was a minute more before the combatants, wrestling furiously over the bare floors above, could be made to understand by a horrified young person, who shrieked the news at them from the top of the staircase, the havoc they had wrought.

But when they comprehended what had happened they hurried downstairs.

"Well, of all the——" Ross was too shocked to finish.

"I say, but we've done it now, have'nt we?" exclaimed Peter, in disgust. "Janey — dad — it did n't hurt you, did it?"

"Only my pride—and my hair," answered Jane, as she vainly tried to brush her curly locks free from plaster.

"It's a shame! Why did n't you stop us? Clumsy louts! Pulling the place down about our ears the very first night!"

"And how we hurried that paper man, to get him through to-night!" lamented Nancy, brushing off her father with anxious fingers. "We were going to have the dining-room all settled to-morrow —"

"And to-morrow 's a holiday," murmured Jane, from under her hair.

She was bending forward, with her head at her knees, while Mrs. Bell shook out the clinging lumps from the tangle of hair in which they were caught.

"It 's a quarter of ten," announced Rufus, cheerfully. "Do we have to clear this up to-night?"

"I should say so!" Ross caught up a broom. "It's the least we can do. Get a box, will you, Rufe, and let's have the worst over. Pete and I will do the job, and the rest of you can go upstairs and dance a hornpipe over our heads. If you will throw things at us from time to time down the stairs it may relieve your feelings."

"Don't feel too badly. I had a notion all the time that that ceiling ought to have been pulled down before we papered the room; it looked old and shaky to me. Now we 'll have a new one that will stand pillow-fights as long as we live here," said Mrs. Bell, smiling at the rueful countenance of her nephew.

"Right you are, and I 'll have a man here

to put that plaster on in the morning, holiday or no holiday," promised Peter.

In ten minutes the plaster had been swept up, Jane's hair had received a thorough brushing, Mr. Bell had been relieved of several lumps which had worked their way down his back, and the family went to bed in as good spirits as if nothing had happened

The next morning Peter started early in quest of a plasterer to restore the ceiling, and finding it by no means easy to discover one who cared to work when he might play, came home after two hours' search baffled but still determined. A passing acquaintance gave him a clue, and he was presently hurrying across the street in search of the Townsends' coachman, whose brother, the acquaintance had said, might be persuaded to do the job.

In the stables, much to his astonishment, he came fairly upon the girl whose propensity for losing things he had described with so much gusto the evening before.

"I beg your pardon," he said, quickly — he seemed to be always begging her pardon — "but I was looking for your coachman. I — he — I hoped he could tell me the name — that is, of course he knows the name — I mean, I wanted his brother's address."

Peter was no stammerer, and it irritated him very much to be saying all this so awkwardly, but there was something about the cool dark eyes of this girl, as she stood looking at him, which rather disconcerted him. She had evidently just dismounted from her horse, and now Peter observed two things — first that she was rather oddly pale, and second, that her side-saddle had slipped, and rested at an altogether improper angle upon the horse's back. As he saw this he came forward.

"What is the matter?" he asked quickly. "You haven't had a fall? You didn't ride this way, of course?"

"Yes, I did," she answered, lifting her head rather high, and then suddenly drooping it again.

"How far? When did it slip? Were you alone?" Peter examined the side-saddle.

"It began to slip — back — at — the boulevard," said the girl, rather slowly. "I — I don't know just how I kept on, but I did. Lewis isn't here. He ought to be. I can't put up Blackthorn myself."

"Let me do it for you." Peter took the bridle from her. He soon had the horse in the stall and had put away the saddle and bridle.

"That was a plucky thing to do," declared Peter, coming back to the stable door, where

the girl had dropped into the coachman's chair, "to ride home with a slipping saddle. But you ought not to have done it, you know. It might have slipped a lot more with a jerk, and thrown you. See here, you 're not feeling just right, are you? Shall I call somebody?"

"No, no!" She started up. "If mother knew the least thing went wrong she would n't let me ride at all. If you — if you just would n't mind staying here a little, till I feel like myself again ——"

"Why, of course I will"— and Peter stayed.

It was only for a few minutes, and meanwhile Lewis, the coachman, had returned, and the matter of the loose saddle-girth had been fully discussed by all three. Then Peter took his way home.

Jane met him at the door. "Did you find where the plasterer lives?" she asked, eagerly.

Peter stared at her, turned about, and gazed across the street, as if he expected to see a plasterer following in his path, trowel and float in hand. Then he burst into a laugh. He mumbled something which sounded like a very peculiar name, if it was a name, and rapidly retraced his footsteps across the street, to make his inquiry of Lewis, the coachman.

CHAPTER III

PETER SEES A LIGHT

THE Bells had been at home for a fortnight in Gay Street.

The little house was in order from cellar to roof, and its occupants had settled down to the routine of their daily living, well content with the new abode. In a way they missed the larger house and freer environments of the remote suburban place they had left, but the early hour at which Mr. Bell and the boys were now able to reach home, and the later one at which they could leave in the morning, amply compensated for the more cramped quarters made necessary by the higher rates of rental in the city.

"It's not a very friendly neighborhood, though, is it, Janey?" commented Peter one evening, as he and Jane stood on the porch, enjoying the mild mid-April evening. "How many calls have you had? Two?"

"Three," corrected Jane, cheerfully. "The two old ladies on the right, the mother of six

on the left, and one odd person from Westlake Street. The rest are still looking us over."

"Nobody from Worthington Square?" Peter's tone was quizzical.

"Absolutely nobody," Jane laughed. "But we have one acquaintance in Worthington Square, Peter — the little Townsend girl with the sweet, pale face. She wants to know us dreadfully, and she's such a dear, democratic little person the smiles positively tremble on her mouth when I meet her — which I do almost every day. So does Nancy. It 's the oddest thing! Nan says she almost never stirs out that the Townsend child does n't appear."

"She wants to get acquainted. I don't blame her. They 're the dullest lot over there. There seems to be one stirabout — the good-looking chap who 's off on horseback every day. But the other son 's a paleface, and the daughter— hum — well ——" Peter's pause was eloquent "I think she's—— Hello! What 's that?"

He had looked over at the big house as he spoke of its inmates, and his eye had been caught by an appearance which struck him as unusual. The house was dimly lighted everywhere, but in one room, the upper one with the semicircular window, there was an effect of brilliancy of a ruddier color than is ordinarily produced by

electric lights. As Peter and Jane now stared at it, it seemed to grow in intensity, and there showed a wavering and flashing of this singular light which looked suspiciously like fire.

"Do you suppose there can be anything wrong?" speculated Peter, anxiously. "Of course a fire of coke or cannel in a fireplace might give that effect, through those thin curtains, but we — haven't seen — anything like it — before — and — By George!" as the light flared more ruddily than ever for an instant and then grew dull again, "I believe there *is* trouble there! Anyhow, I 'll run over and find out! They can't blame me for that."

He was starting off at a run when Jane darted after him. "I 'm sure I saw flames jump up, Pete!" she called, excitedly. "The window's open, and the curtain blew to one side. Oh, hurry! Most of them are away; I saw them drive off an hour ago."

She was running at Peter's side, fleet of foot as he. Her mind had leaped to the youngest member of the unknown household, the one who did not drive away after nightfall to dinners and parties, like the others. Only that day she had met Shirley and exchanged with her the few bright words the little girl seemed to welcome so eagerly. They ran up the steps of the great

portico, with its stately columns, and hurrying across it, came to a partly opened door. Peter rang the bell, peering impatiently through the vestibule into the large, square, half-lighted interior. "I 'll wait just one minute for an answer," he said with his foot on the threshold, "and then I 'll be up that gorgeous staircase back there."

Jane put her head in at the door. "I smell smoke!" she breathed, and Peter pushed past her. Delaying no longer, he ran across the hall and up the staircase, closely followed by Jane.

As he reached the top, a little white-clad figure ran screaming toward him. He rushed by, but Jane, at his heels, caught the little girl up in her arms.

"There, there, darling," she soothed the frightened, sobbing child, "you 're all safe! Peter will take care of the fire. Are they all away? There, don't be frightened, dear!"

Over Shirley's head Jane saw Peter vanish through a doorway — beyond which she could see a mass of smoke and flame — slam down a window, and dash out again, closing the door behind him. Then he was off down the stairs, shouting for help as he went, and getting no response from any quarter of the strangely deserted house.

"Take her away!" he called back to Jane, as he ran, and Jane attempted to obey.

"Where are your clothes, dear?" she asked the child in her arms, but could get no coherent answer.

She looked about her, and carrying Shirley, who was slender and as light of weight as a much younger child, soon discovered the little girl's room. She caught up the pile of clothes on a chair, and attempted to dress her charge. But Shirley only cried and clung. Jane pulled a silken blanket from the little brass bed, and wrapping the child in it, and rolling her clothes into a bundle, which she tucked under one arm, carried her downstairs and into a small reception-room near the front entrance.

Peter, dashing through the silent house toward the rear, hoping to come upon a man-servant somewhere, was met at last by a startled maid.

"A room upstairs is on fire," he said. "Any men here to help me put it out? If there are n't I must send in an alarm. Any fire-extinguishers about?"

The girl's wits scattered at the news, but she managed to recall the fact that the coachman must be at the stable again by this time, and flew to call him. Peter ran back to keep track of events. He saw that the walls were heavy,

that the fire was thus far confined to the one room, and that if help came speedily it would not be necessary to call out the fire department, an expedient to be avoided, he felt sure, unless the danger to the house was greater than he thought.

But the frightened maid forestalled him in this plan. She ran to the telephone and sent in the alarm herself, although in the confusion of her fright she lost some minutes in getting the message properly reported. Meanwhile, the coachman having arrived to aid Peter, bringing with him the apparatus kept in the stables for the purpose of extinguishing fire, the two were soon successfully fighting the flames without further aid.

Shirley, downstairs, was still trembling in Jane's arms, and incoherently crying for her brother Murray, who, she insisted, had not gone out with the others that evening, but had been reading in the room which was now on fire. At that moment Murray himself came limping in at the open door. The maid met him at the threshold.

"O Mr. Murray," she began — and Jane, in the reception-room, heard her — "the house is on fire, and ——"

"What? Where? Where 's Shirley? Who 's ——"

Jane, with the child in her arms, appeared at the door of the reception-room. "She 's here

— quite safe," she said; and with an exclamation, Murray came anxiously toward the two. Then he paused and looked up the staircase, for through the distant closed door upstairs could be heard the sounds of voices, shouting directions. The maid was beginning an excited explanation when Jane interrupted her:

"My brother is here, and he and your coachman are putting it out, I 'm sure."

"Has anybody sent in an alarm?"

"I did," said the maid. "The young man told me not to, but how did he know he could put it out? And the master 'd be blamin' me ——"

"We don't want the firemen here if we don't need them," Murray was beginning, when the distant and familiar clang of a gong stopped the words upon his lips. In a moment more it became evident that a fire-engine and its train were upon them. Murray turned away, and started hurriedly up the stairs.

At the approaching noises, which to the delicate child had always been peculiarly terrifying, little Shirley began to cry afresh. Jane gathered her up with an air of determination.

"I 'm going to take her to our house across the street," she said to the maid. "There's no need of her staying here to be so frightened."

The girl made no remonstrance. She was too excited to do more than bewail the absence of the other servants, and the misfortune of her having been left alone in charge. "I 'd just stepped out of the door a minute, miss," she explained, "to speak to a friend of mine that was passing. 'T was a mercy I left the door open, or the young gentleman couldn't have ——. There 's the gong! — There 's the fire-engine! — Oh, my — but look at the crowd comin' after 'em!"

"Show me a side door where I can slip out, please," requested Jane hurriedly, and the maid obeyed.

As the firemen ran in at the front door, Jane, with Shirley in her arms, hurried out at a low side entrance, from which a path through the shrubbery led to a gateway in the high hedge next the street.

As she reached her own porch, the rest of her family came rushing out, having heard the commotion in the street. She almost ran into Nancy who stopped abruptly to stare at Jane's burden.

"Come back into the house with me, Nan," said Jane, quickly. "Here 's our frightened little neighbour. The fire will soon be out, but I thought she'd be happier over here, for the family are all away."

In the house she put Shirley down upon the

couch in the front room, and the child, staring up, her big eyes full of tears and fright, beheld the face of the girl she had so longed to know smiling down at her.

"This is splendid!" said Nancy Bell. "I've wanted to know you like everything, and now I 've got you right here in my own house. Won't you let me help you get dressed? I 'd love to."

Seeing that Nancy would be better for the shy little visitor than any number of older persons, Jane left the two together, and went out to see what was happening.

It was very little. The fire-engine was already turning to leave, the driver grumbling at a needless alarm. "All out!" a voice was shouting, and the crowd was reluctantly pausing upon the edge of the lawn, disappointed that no further excitement was to be had. Upstairs the firemen had found the fire subdued to a mere dying smother of smoke, the efficient chemical having made quick work of the blaze, which had not had time to attack the walls of the room, but had been confined to its furnishings.

Peter, his hands and clothes grimy, made light of the affair to Murray, who was looking in at the ruin of the room.

"I took a few liberties with your front door," Peter said, "finding it open and no one about.

Oh, no, it hadn't much headway; I saw that when I decided not to call out the department. It was quite a blaze, but mostly the light stuff about. It must have caught from the curtains blowing into that student-lamp."

"That's my fault," Murray owned. "I hate electric lights to read by, so I lighted that lamp here. I was reading, but the room began to feel stuffy, and I opened the window. It looked so pleasant outside I thought I 'd take a turn round the square. I 'm not a fast walker" —he glanced at his lame leg — "and I was probably at the other side of the square when you came in. Look here, you must have been mighty quick to take in the situation, for I couldn't have been away over five minutes when you saw the blaze."

"My sister and I happened to be standing out on our porch — you see, we live just round the corner in Gay Street — about opposite these windows here ——"

"I know," Murray nodded. "I 've seen you."

"We thought at first it was a cannel-coal fire — you know how they flash with a red light. But when we suspected, we just ran across. I hope your little sister wasn't too badly frightened ?"

"Her room's next to this. Poor child, she *was* frightened. I deserve a thrashing, you know, for my carelessness. Every one of the family is

out, and all the servants except my mother's maid. It was very kind of your sister to take Shirley in charge. She's downstairs with her now."

"Will your people be getting news of the fire-alarm and be frightened?" Peter asked, putting on his coat.

"I don't think so. Father and mother are out of town at a dinner, and my sister's at a party in a country house. They won't be likely to hear. I don't know where my brother is. Don't go. Must you? I — you know I'm awfully obliged to you for this ——"

"It's nothing. Glad I happened to be on hand," and Peter would have said good night and run down the stairs, but he saw that his host meant to go down with him. So he descended slowly, keeping pace with the other's halting steps, and talking with him as he went.

"Your sister was here when I came in," said Murray, glancing into the small reception-room. The maid, who had been watching the departure of the crowd from the window of this room, turned to him.

"The young lady took Miss Shirley home with her," she explained. "I was that flustered I let her go without so much as asking you, Mr. Murray, but ——"

"It's all right," Murray put in, hastily. "It

was just the thing to do, the child was so scared. If they 're at your house, I 'll just step over there with you, if you don't mind."

"Glad to have you," said Peter, wondering what Jane would say to this second unexpected introduction.

Murray, as he walked slowly toward the house in Gay Street, felt distinctly glad of the chance. Since his illness he had led a lonely life, and he longed for comrades near at hand. From behind the curtains he had done not a little watching of the coming and going in Gay Street, and had been strongly attracted toward each one of the household across the way. He liked the faces of those people. He had wished that he could make their acquaintance.

"Walk in!" invited Peter, throwing the door hospitably open; and Murray, his quick, curious eyes taking in everything at a glance, entered the small front room, which was just then unoccupied. He heard voices and laughter near at hand, but for the moment, while Peter went to summon his mother, he had time to look about him.

There was not very much in the room, and there was nothing of value, as that word was used in the Townsend house, yet the visitor could not help finding the place warmly attractive. There was a homelike look about it, and there

was an indefinable air of refinement. The furniture was old and very nearly shabby, but it was not the cheap and tawdry furniture one might have expected to find in such a house. The pictures on the walls were all good copies of great pictures, or photographs set under glass. Piles of music lay on the old-fashioned square piano, and a few papers and magazines, all of good selection, were upon the table, in the centre of which burned a brilliant lamp. But most of all, the character of the household was shown by the books — as it inevitably is.

Of these there were a surprising number. Murray felt his respect for the Bell family rising immensely as he noted the contents of the rows of home-made book-shelves. They were in plain, worn bindings, most of them, quite unlike the stately rows in the great library at home; but they were the same old friends, in common clothes, and Murray rejoiced at the sight.

Peter was quickly back, bringing with him the lady whom Murray recognised as the mother of the family. She *was* a lady — no doubt of that. He had been sure of it before. Now, as he listened to her voice — the test incontrovertible — he knew beyond question.

She greeted him cordially. He was charmed with her face, with her manner, with everything

about her. Then Peter brought all the others in, and Murray shook hands with them all. Shirley appeared, clinging to Nancy's hands, and Shirley was so happy, and begged so hard in his ear to stay a few minutes longer, that he willingly delayed their departure.

Fine fellows, Peter and Ross and Rufus proved to be on acquaintance. Not in the least overawed by the presence of the rich man's son from Worthington Square, they talked business and football and politics and various other things in those few minutes, in a hearty, half-boyish, decidedly manly fashion that he thoroughly enjoyed.

It happened that Murray said less to Jane than to any of the others, but he noticed her not a little. He thought he had never seen a girl who looked so spirited and sweet and gay and gentle all in one. He felt that his sister Olive must learn to know her at once, that she might learn what it is to be pretty without seeming aware of the fact, and how it is possible to make a stranger feel wholly at his ease without appearing to exercise any arts.

"I suppose I ought to be taking my sister home," Murray said at last, getting to his feet. "The truth is, she has wanted to know Miss Nancy since she first saw her, and so ——"

"Murray wanted to know you, too," said

Shirley, in Nancy's ear; but as her brother paused, the words were audible to everybody.

"To know *me?*" queried Nancy, in surprise, and everybody smiled.

"I 'm sure my mother and sister will call — soon," said Murray, trying to feel sure of that rather doubtful proposition as he made it.

The moment would have been an awkward one in some small houses, for it was impossible not to remember that the Worthington Squares do not make many calls in the Gay Streets, but young Rufus, studying Shirley with interest, broke in, without intention, upon his mother's reply. Rufus was quite untroubled by the social inequalities existing between localities divided only by a stone's throw.

"That 's a dandy tennis-court you will have there when you put it out," he remarked.

"It 's pretty fair — and we shall have it in shape early this year," replied Murray, smiling. There was a beauty about Murray's rare smile which quite transformed his pale face. His eyes met Jane's as he spoke.

"It 's too bad to grow up past the point of breaking the ice so easily, is n't it?" she said, merrily, as he shook hands.

"We 'll have to follow their wise example," he replied.

"I hope that you 'll find your way over to Gay Street often in the future," declared Peter, shaking hands.

"I mean to, thank you, if you 'll let me?" Murray looked into Mrs. Bell's eyes, and a shade of wistfulness crept into his own, which she saw, and recognising, was sure she understood.

"Please come, if you care to," she said, cordially, and he felt her warm, firm hand give his a friendly pressure, which quite completed the capturing of his heart.

A ringing step on the porch outside, a knock at the door —it boasted no bell —and everybody looked up surprised, for it was nearly ten o'clock. Ross opened the door.

"I beg your pardon," said a gay and careless voice outside, "but I came to look for my brother and sister. They seem to be lost, and I 'm told they 're here."

"Come in!" said Ross, and the owner of the voice appeared upon the threshold. Standing there, surveying the company with his characteristically assured expression, his handsome face taking on a saucy smile as his eyes fell on his brother, Forrest Townsend was carefully and formally presented by Murray to each one of the household in turn.

He looked a fine figure in his evening clothes,

his long outer coat falling open, his hat in his hand. His audacious young eyes fell on Jane before he was presented to her, and his manner acquired a sort of laughing gallantry rather effective. "It was a very lucky fire for us," he said, gaily, as he bowed. "I only wish I had been at home."

CHAPTER IV

FORREST PLAYS A TRICK

"IT'S no more than civil, mother, that you and Olive should go over and call!" insisted Murray Townsend, with heat.

"I can't see that it is necessary at all," replied Mrs. Townsend, with offsetting coolness. "The young man has been properly thanked for his services; indeed, I should say that between you and Forrest and Shirley the entire family have had quite fuss enough made over them."

"I did n't make much of the fuss," Forrest said. "I was only there five minutes at the end of the show. Time enough to see, though, that those people are n't off the same piece as the usual tenants of that house. They 've seen better days, or I miss my guess."

"Not at all. They 've never had much money, but they 're educated people, just the same — self-educated, a mighty good sort. You 've only to look at the books that fairly line that little room to see for yourself. Is n't there any rule for sizing up men but by the dollars

they 've made—or women but by the clothes they wear?"

The vehemence of Murray's speech was so unusual, and his ordinarily quiet and indifferent expression had given place to one so eager, that the family all turned with one accord to look at him. They were at dinner, one late April evening, a week after the fire. The dining-room was the one place in the house where all the family were accustomed to meet; therefore any question of the sort which Murray had proposed was brought up there as a matter of course.

Mr. Townsend himself answered his son's pointed observation, forestalling the rejoinder about to fall from his wife's lips:

"It's the way of the world, Murray, and an unjust one in many cases. Still, one can't help feeling that a man who has lived to the age of Joseph Bell without reaching a position higher than the one he holds with the Armstrong Company can't be possessed of a very unusual endowment of brains."

"I should say that depends on whether making money has been his ambition, or something else."

"He certainly has n't achieved the something else," was Olive's comment. "Not even a decent home."

"Decent!" Murray turned on her. "It's a

home worthy the name — I can tell you that! And if you refuse to call on these people that live in it, after Peter Bell saved ours over our heads, I say you 're acting like snobs!"

"Murray!" His mother spoke very sharply. Forrest laughed. He enjoyed the scene, being inclined, by his remembrance of Jane, to take his brother's side. Mr. Townsend came to the rescue.

"You are rather rough in your language, Murray, but I think you are right in your notions about the call. It 's only a courtesy, surely, Eloise, to go over and make one call. You don't need to continue the acquaintance unless you wish, but I should be glad myself if you would go. It is several days now since ——"

"It's a week," said Murray.

"He knows — no doubt of that!" laughed Forrest. "He 's cultivated the acquaintance, anyhow. I saw him walking up the street yesterday with the pretty girl of the family."

"You walked up with her yourself the day before!" cried Shirley.

Forrest threw back his head and laughed. "You 're a little spy. Well, I don't mind owning that I did. She's a trim-looking girl on the street, too, if she does n't wear the furbelows Olive does. She ——"

"We may as well go over and call, mother,"

said Olive, with emphasis. "If both the boys are running after the family, we ought to find out what they are."

"You won't be so condescending as you think," Murray said to her, as he left the room at her side. "Mrs. Bell is n't the sort to be impressed with the honour you do her."

Mrs. Townsend and Olive, realising that the wishes of the three male members of the family were not to be lightly disregarded, made the call without further delay. Dressed as carefully as if they had been calling in Worthington Square, they knocked upon the door of the little house in Gay Street, and were admitted by Nancy.

It chanced that this was a Saturday afternoon. And Saturday was a half-holiday for nearly all workers in the city. Thus it came about that in the middle of the stiff little call — stiff in spite of Mrs. Bell and Jane, who had received their visitors with all simplicity and naturalness — Peter arrived at home. Being burdened with small parcels, he hurried round to the kitchen door, and depositing his parcels on the table there, started in search of his sisters.

"Jane — Nan — where are you?" he shouted through the little house, and before Nancy, springing down the stairs, could stop him, he had bolted into the front room.

Olive Townsend, turning quickly, recognised the big, fresh-coloured youth, with the good-humoured, clever-looking face, who had several times been of assistance to her. Peter was presented to the visitors by his mother, who seemed quite undisturbed by the interruption. Jane only laughed, and Peter himself recovered his balance with but a momentary show of confusion.

"It was important business, you see," he said, smiling, and explaining to Jane. "I brought home the flower-seeds you wanted, and I had an idea they must get into the ground within the next fifteen minutes, or it would be too late."

"I don't wonder he thought so," Jane said to Olive, glancing from her brother to her guest. "I impressed upon him this morning the fact that if the sweet peas were n't planted to-day we should n't have any growing before August. Don't go, Peter. Perhaps Miss Townsend can tell us what else we ought to have in our garden."

Peter obediently drew up a chair and sat down.

Olive, responding that she knew nothing whatever about gardens, because the gardener always attended to whatever flower-beds there were about the grounds, was conscious of a keen and steady scrutiny from Peter's cool gray eyes, quite as if he were not in the least abashed by her distinguished presence.

She was, moreover, forced to acknowledge, as the moments went by, that Peter could talk, and talk well. He came to the assistance of Jane, who had begun to feel the difficulties of entertaining the visitor, and told an amusing incident of the morning's experience. Before she knew it, Olive was laughing, for Peter's clever mimicry was quite irresistible.

As she rose to go Olive made an immense condescension: "I believe it must have been you, Mr. Bell," she said, "who picked up my handkerchief for me one day."

Peter laid his hand on his heart with a droll gesture and a formal bow — an interesting combination.— "I think I had the honour," he admitted, with a twinkle.

And now something unforeseen happened. Exactly as the visitors rose to go, the April skies, which five minutes before had been smiling, suddenly opened, and poured out one of those astonishing spring downfalls which arrest street traffic on the instant.

Mrs. Townsend and Olive, with the door opening to let them out, stood still upon the threshold in dismay, glancing down at their delicate spring attire.

"You can't go in this," said Mrs. Bell, cordially. "It will be over soon. Please come back and sit down."

The fates must surely have intended from the first to mix up things between these two families of Townsend and Bell. With that end in view nothing could have been more opportune than this shower, for it lasted a good half-hour without showing signs of slackening, and it contributed also lightning and thunder, which made Olive shrink and shudder. Also Ross, McAndrew and young Rufus Bell, coming home in the late afternoon, and being caught at the corner in the downpour, dashed for the little front porch for shelter, and then into the living-room.

Ross, making apologies on account of his moist condition, and getting through the room and out with Rufus as fast as possible, was yet able to take in the surprising fact that Peter was sitting in the corner with the girl from the aristocratic square, chatting cheerfully with her. and eliciting not altogether unwilling smiles in response.

Out in the kitchen, with the door closed, Ross and Rufus interviewed Nancy.

"How on earth did old Peter get into it like this?" Ross inquired, as he hung his coat to dry by the stove. "I could hardly believe my eyes to see him confabulating with Miss Worthington Square. She seems quite human, does n't she — when you get her indoors?"

"I don't know," said Nancy. "I only let them in. She looks awfully pretty, don't you think? And maybe she's nice when you get to know her."

"If you ever do," qualified Ross. "Pretty? Well, all I saw was a gorgeous hat and a pair of big eyes; I felt as if somebody was looking at me with a spy-glass. She is n't in it with our Janey, if you 're talking about prettiness."

"No, of course not!" cried loyal Nancy.

By the time the storm had ceased, a good deal of the stiffness in the little front room had melted away. It may be possible for some people to be formal and frigid for the space of a ten-minute call, but to keep it up for full three-quarters of an hour longer, while rain pours, and lightning flashes, and unconventional young persons dash in and out, and a youth like Peter tells jolly stories — that becomes much more difficult. Mrs. Townsend maintained a peculiar dignity to the end, but Olive — well, in spite of her prejudices, Olive was young, and liked young associates, and as she looked and listened, it became more and more difficult for her to refuse to recognise that the people in this little house were not ordinary, not commonplace, not uneducated, as she had fancied them, but bright, and gay, and interesting.

When she gave Jane her hand, as she took

her leave — the April storm having at last given place again to brilliant April sunshine — she found herself wishing she might know this prepossessing maid. There was a straightforward sweetness in the glance of Jane's rich hazel eyes, a captivating charm in her free smile, which the other girl had never encountered in quite so beguiling a form. Olive Townsend, of all the girls whom Jane had ever met least likely to succumb to the fascinations of another girl not in her own "set," fell, nevertheless, considerably under Jane's influence on that very first encounter. In taking leave she said to Jane that which she had not dreamed of saying, commonplace an expression of friendliness as it was: "I shall hope to see you often, since we live so near."

"Gone — gone — all gone?" queried Ross, putting in his head cautiously at the living-room door, as the visitors turned the corner.

"All gone," replied Peter. "Gone forever — silks and velvets and new spring hats."

"'Ribbons and laces, and sweet, pretty faces,'" chanted Ross, reminded of the old child-rhyme "'Sugar and spice, and everything nice.' Not much sugar about Miss Worthington Square, eh, Pete?"

"Oh, I don't know," mused Peter, gazing absently out of the window toward the square, where Olive's spring finery was just fluttering out

of sight. "She 's not so bad at close range. I should n't wonder if an earthquake shock might stir her up into quite an interesting girl. Lacking that, some lesser convulsion of nature might possibly ——"

"The Bell family certainly did their best to shock her. If daddy and Nan could have just burst in from somewhere, I think the effect would have been complete," declared Jane, merrily.

The subject of these comments, upon reaching home, found herself called upon for an opinion of the Bells.

Forrest Townsend, encountering his sister upon the stairs, followed her to her room.

"Own up that they 're not as odd as you thought," he demanded.

"They 're very well — of their sort," was Olive's reply, observing herself in her mirror, and congratulating herself on the fact that the new spring hat was undoubtedly becoming.

"See here, why not send Jane and Peter an invitation to your party?"

"'*Jane and Peter!*' You seem to be pretty intimate with them already."

"I don't call them that to their faces. But you 've seen for yourselves they 're all right. Ask them over; it won't hurt you."

"Why, Forrest Townsend — people who don't know a soul in our set! What an idea!"

"A mighty good idea. Nobody 'll know they live in Gay Street — and you won't be ashamed of them either."

"I shall not do anything of the sort." Olive took off the hat and laid it in its box. "I don't know what in the world has got into you and Murray; you 're both perfectly mad over the Bells. If you 're so charmed with that girl you can go and call on her, I suppose."

She recalled with some surprise her own liking for Jane, wondering, now that her brother showed his prepossessions so strongly, how she could have fancied her. It seemed sometimes to be a matter of principle with Olive never to like the people whom Forrest or Murray liked.

"See here," said Forrest, frowning, "I think it 's pretty ill-natured of you not to invite one or two persons I ask you to, whether you happen to want them or not. This party may be your birthday affair, but there 's no reason why somebody else should n't have a hand in the inviting. Let 's see your list, will you?"

Olive unwillingly handed him a sheet of paper, upon which the names of her prospective guests were written. He scanned it sharply.

"Same old crowd," he observed, his hand-

some brows knit into a scowl. "I should think you 'd want a little fresh blood, to liven things up."

"For you to sit in a corner with, you mean."

"Will you do it to please me?"

"No!" Olive snatched the list out of his hand and returned it to a box, which she laid in a drawer of her desk.

Forrest stood looking at her for a moment, then, without a further word, shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the room.

Two hours later he came quietly back. Olive had gone out, as he knew. He crossed the room to the desk, searched and found the box into which he had seen the list put, and discovered, as he had expected, the invitations to the birthday party folded and partially addressed. He knew that they were to go out upon the morrow, and that Olive doubtless would finish the task of addressing them that evening. He had heard her bewailing the fact that this labour consumed so much time, but he had not cared to offer to assist her.

Forrest looked the invitations over, smiling to himself, took out two unaddressed envelopes and put them into his pocket, closed the door and strolled away. In his own room he took them out again, and wrote upon them in his best hand, "Peter Bell, Esq.," and "Miss Jane

Bell," adding the street and number, and stamping and sealing them, still with the laugh in the corners of his mischievous mouth.

The next day, when Olive's invitations went into the letter-box on the corner, they were shortly followed by two of which the giver of the party had no knowledge.

It happened that the early morning mail in Gay Street always arrived just before the departure of the family workers for their place of business. So when Nancy, after answering the postman's ring, came back to the table with the mail, both Peter and Jane, just finishing breakfast, were on hand to receive it.

"Whose handwriting can this be, I wonder?" speculated Jane, intently studying the dashing address.

Peter glanced over her shoulder. "Same as mine," he observed, ripping his envelope open. "Looks like a wedding invitation; but since none of our friends, Janey, are so much as thinking of getting married — Hello, what 's this?"

"Oh, why —" Jane was stammering, eagerly. "O Petey — how lovely — why — There, I knew she was n't as cold and proud as you thought her!"

"Who — what?" demanded Nancy, with excitement.

"Miss Olive Townsend," explained Jane, flushing with pleasure.

"What! Miss Worthington Square invited you two every-day folks to her party?" Ross inquired, getting up from the table and reaching for his hat. "Pete, you 'll lose your car if you stand mooning over that thing."

"How did you know she was to have a party?"

"Little Miss Shirley confided it to me."

"Me, too!" cried Nancy, proudly. "But she did n't tell me her sister would ask you."

"Miss Olive probably did n't intend to," hazarded Peter, folding up his note and putting it carefully in his pocket, "until she came to call and saw our charms. She came — she saw — we conquered — eh, Janey?— with our sweet smiles and our stories. How about it, sister? Do we go?"

"If," began Jane slowly, the smile fading a little on her bright face, "if ——"

"If — we've anything to wear!" supplied Ross, and began to whistle gaily. "*Oh, ye shall walk in silk attire*," breaking off to glance at the clock and start hastily for the door, with Peter and Rufus after him. Jane turned to Mrs. Bell, who, sitting quietly in her place at the head of the table, was regarding her young daughter as if she understood all the doubts which had instantly risen in the girl's mind.

"I think we can manage it, dear," she said, "if the party dress does n't have to match the invitation."

Jane's face grew flushed again. "I can wear anything, mother, if I have some fresh ribbons. But Peter ——"

"Yes — Peter —" agreed Mrs. Bell. She rose and came round to Jane. "Peter shall have a new cravat," said she, and smiled into Jane's eyes.

Jane smiled back. Each knew that the other was thinking of Peter's best black suit — in which he went to church on Sundays. Each knew that the Townsend sons would wear evening clothes.

"Yes, with a new cravat Petey will be all right," said Jane. "Dear boy, he was pleased, was n't he? And it *is* nice of her to ask us!"

CHAPTER V

WITHOUT GLOVES

O JANE, the big porch is all shut in with white stuff, and there's a striped awning where the carriages stop, just as if it was a great grown-up party or a wedding. And I saw them carrying in loads of palms and things. Oh, are n't you excited to be going?"

This was Nancy Bell, flying into the front room upstairs, where Mrs. Bell and Jane were putting the finishing touches to Jane's frock, to be worn that evening.

"Awfully excited, darling," admitted Jane, smiling at the eager little sister.

"Oh, how pretty that is!" Nancy clasped her hands in ecstasy over the dainty ruffled skirt, with its tiny yellow flowers scattered over a white ground. Then she caught up the long sash belt of primrose-yellow ribbon, its graceful rosettes and flowing ends promising an effective finish to the simple toilet. "You 'll be the prettiest girl at the party!" she declared, joyously.

Mrs. Bell and Jane laughed across at each

other. "In a ten-cent dimity," their eyes said, with congratulations, "reduced from eighteen!"

"My ribbon is what rejoices my soul," said Jane, touching the soft silk. "That was a bargain we just happened on — the price cut in two because of a few soiled places. We simply did n't use those at all, and there were enough long lengths to make the streamers. It 's such a beautiful quality it makes the whole dress look finer than it is."

"How can you ever wait till evening?" sighed Nancy. "O Jane, Shirley wants me to hide in the shrubbery over there by the hedge, and she 's going to slip out with some ice-cream and cake for me!"

Mrs. Bell's eyes and Jane's met again with a smile. Jane's eyebrows went up in interrogation. Mrs. Bell nodded. "I think Nancy may have that much of the party," she said.

Evening came at last, although Nancy had moments of feeling sure that it never would. Jane, her curly auburn locks tied up in charming fashion, with various rebellious tendrils waving about her face, slipped into the pretty frock, and Mrs. Bell arranged the primrose girdle, which set off the whole effect. Peter, in his best black suit and wearing the new cravat, looked at his sister approvingly.

"My, but I 'm proud of my girl!" he said.

"Not prouder than I am of my big brother," responded Jane.

The family saw them off, rejoicing in their youthful good looks, and sure they would hold their own in appearance with anybody in Worthington Square. Peter and Jane, not feeling quite so confident, yet experiencing a pleasant stir of anticipation, walked slowly round the corner.

Nearly all the guests were arriving in carriages, and the brother and sister, as they crossed the porch, encountered a number of these, entering from the *porte-cochère*. As Jane's eyes fell upon the gaily dressed young people, the first thing she observed about them gave her an unplesant shock. They all, youths and girls, were wearing gloves. Jane glanced from her own round white arms, bare from the elbows, to Peter's uncovered hands.

"Peter, we never once thought of gloves," she murmured in his ear, as they lingered to let the party from the carriages go in at the door ahead of them.

Peter stared from her to the other guests. Then his gay twinkle replaced the look of dismay. "Gloves — on youngsters like us! Don't you care a bit," he whispered back in her ear.

It was a little difficult not to care, especially

for Jane, as in the dressing-room upstairs she met many curious glances. The maid in charge even offered to help her put on her gloves, and Jane could not help feeling a bit unhappy as she replied that she was not wearing gloves.

But the sight of Peter, smiling serenely at her from the head of the staircase, where he awaited her, strengthened her resolution not to mind. A glance at the mirror had assured her that the inexpensive little dimity with its primrose ribbons was irreproachable in its dainty distinction of style — thanks to Mrs. Bell's clever fingers — and this knowledge was very comforting. Her face was as bright as ever when she joined Peter, whose hearty whisper: "You 're all right!" put her quite on her feet again.

Downstairs, where Olive Townsend stood receiving with her mother, with Forrest and Murray close at hand, a brief but interesting colloquy took place just before Jane and Peter came into the reception room. Forrest had been keeping sharp watch on the hall entrance, and the moment that he saw the two Bells arrive and make their way toward the staircase, he watched for a chance to get a word in the ears of his family. A lull in the arrivals gave him his opportunity.

"Olive," he said coolly to his sister in an under-

tone, "I took the liberty of sending Jane and Peter Bell an invitation — and they 're here. I want you to brace up and give them just as nice a welcome as you 're giving the rest. Hold on! If you 're angry at anybody, it 's at me, and you 've no right to take it out of them for that. One thing I can tell you; if you are frosty to them you 'll settle with me afterward."

He had his sister in a corner — so to speak. Olive cared very much for appearances. There were many eyes upon her; she could make no angry response or show chagrin in any way without attracting notice and comment. All she could do — which she promptly did — was to whisper back, with lips which smiled for the sake of those who looked at her:

"You wretch, I 'll pay you off — never fear!"

"Do; I don't mind," and Forrest approached his mother. He was her favourite son, and she was a thorough woman of the world. He had reckoned on her making the best of the situation; and when he had told her, with a gay glance and a furtive squeeze of her hand, he received no more severe threat of punishment than he had expected in her light: "You naughty boy! You 'll have to take care of them; nobody else knows them, or will care to."

"I 'll see to them," was her son's careless

reply, and he crossed over to Murray, who was indifferently playing his part of young host. To him, as Jane and Peter appeared at the doorway, Forrest made a hasty explanation.

Murray's face instantly brightened, and he answered promptly: "It was a risky thing to do, but I 'm glad they 're here. Between us we 'll make sure they have a good time."

There was nothing in the greeting of Mrs. Townsend or of Olive to give Peter and Jane a hint of their position. The Bells had expected only a formal reception on an occasion like this, and when they received it, felt no special lack. And whatever was wanting in the greeting of the hostesses was made up by the masculine half of the receiving party.

"This is jolly," said Forrest, giving each a hearty grasp of the hand. "I 'm immensely glad you could come," and as others pressed toward him, he passed them on to Murray.

"Do you know," said Murray, "having you two come to-night makes up to me for the whole thing. I detest parties, as a rule, never go to them, and would n't come downstairs at our own affairs if I could get out of it. But I 'm glad I could n't —this time—. See here, you don't know many of these people, do you?"

"Nobody at all."

"Of course not — having only just moved into the neighbourhood. I can't do much myself except sit about and look on, and I 'm going to be so bold as to beg your company, Miss Bell, for so much of the evening as you 'll give me. There are a lot of pleasant nooks about the rooms and halls, and I 'd like to try them all with you. That 's a selfish plan, is n't it?" and he smiled at her.

"It 's lovely of you, of course, and you know it," she answered.

"It 's a risk for me, lest I lose you, but I 'll present a few of these chaps to you, first, so if you care to dance ——"

"I don't — truly."

"I 'm glad. But I 'll do it, for the sake of my conscience," and Murray began the task on the spot.

Half a dozen youths accordingly bowed ceremoniously to Jane, gazed with interest at her charming face, said something or other in the way of an attempt at conversation, and got away again. Not one asked Jane to dance.

"She needs Olive's guardianship, not mine," thought Murray, resentfully. "If Olive backed her up, the rest would accept her in a jiffy. But Olive won't do it — I know that well enough, — so I 'll do my best in my way, and thank my stars for the chance. There is n't a girl in the house to match her, that 's sure."

The moment that his duties in the reception-room were over Murray convoyed Jane away to one of the attractive retreats he had mentioned, a beflowered nook on the staircase landing, from which they could view the hall below, and see the greater part of the long drawing-room, where the dancing had begun. Strains of gay music from the orchestra floated pleasantly up to them.

"Now this is something like!" said Murray, sinking back upon the soft divan behind the palms. He pulled off his gloves as he spoke, rolled them into a ball and crammed them into his pocket. He did not put them on again that evening — a bit of kindliness which two guests understood and appreciated.

"If I 'm not monopolising the host when he ought to be looking after his other guests," replied Jane, as her eyes followed the distant dancers.

"If there is any monopoly, I 'm the guilty one — and enjoying my guilt. Honestly, Miss Bell, it 's a fine chance for me to get acquainted with my neighbour, if she 'll let me. And as for my being missed —" A shake of the head told Jane more than its owner meant of his loneliness, at which she had hitherto only guessed.

Meanwhile, Peter had also fallen into friendly hands, if youthful ones. Shirley, allowed to play a modest part in the affairs of the evening, but

finding nobody willing to give her more than a smile and nod, fell upon Peter as a possible ally. He had been standing at one side of the crush, in the doorway of the drawing-room, looking on with interested eyes, but feeling a trifle deserted, nevertheless, when he felt a warm little hand slide into his own. Looking down, surprised, he met Shirley's friendly smile.

"You don't know many people, do you?" asked that frank young person.

"I don't know anybody," returned Peter. "No, I ought not to say that, for your brother Forrest presented me to a number of girls. But I don't know how to dance, and they soon left me for livelier company."

"Nobody asks me to dance, either," said Shirley, "because Olive would'n't invite any boys of my age, and the big ones want the big girls."

"I don't," Peter assured her. "I want one about thirteen years old, dressed in a jolly white lacy frock, with pink ribbons and pink slippers. I feel more at home with a girl like that than with any of those I was introduced to. You see, their hair was so — done up!"

"Done up! Was n't your sister's hair done up?" queried Shirley. "Oh no, I remember! Those lovely thick curls of hers were tied in a bunch at her neck — such a lovely way; none of the others

do theirs like that. She 's awfully pretty, is n't she? Prettier than Olive, I think."

"I admire my sister very much," agreed Peter, "but it would be hard for anybody to be prettier than your sister."

His eyes turned to Olive as he spoke. She stood near by, exchanging gay talk with a tall youth in the interval between dances. More beautifully dressed than any young girl he had ever seen, her dark face lighted into brilliancy by excitement, the rare colour in her cheeks set off by the big bunch of red roses she carried, she was a picturesque figure indeed.

"Yes, Olive does look pretty," admitted Olive's little sister. "Excuse me a minute, please," she added, and slipped over to Olive's side. If Peter could have heard the brief whispered conversation exchanged, he would hardly have dared to stand watching it, as he did.

"Olive," begged Shirley, when with difficulty she had secured her sister's reluctant attention, "if I take care of Peter Bell for a while, won't you be nice to him? He does n't dance, and he does n't know anybody ——"

"It 's enough that he 's here!" retorted Olive, with a frown. "I did n't ask him or his sister, so I ——"

"You did n't ask him?"

"No, no — run along!"

"But who ——"

"Forrest — without saying a word to me."

"Oh!" Shirley gasped, and was silent for a minute. Then she pulled at Olive's arm again.

"Olive, but they 're our guests just the same, and ——"

"Shirley, don't bother me now!"

"Listen, Olive, just a minute. Peter says nobody could be prettier than you."

It was a shot which told. Olive's grudging attention was arrested. She glanced over her sister's head, in the direction of Peter. Her eyes met his, and she turned away again, but not before the momentary vision of the strong, intent face had impressed itself upon her as rather better worth consideration than many of the others.

The thought of such a compliment as Shirley had reported coming from those firm-set lips of Peter Bell gave the recipient rather a novel sensation.

Olive had been out of patience with Peter from the moment that she caught sight of his unconventional attire, but she felt all at once more tolerant of his presence. "He did n't tell you to tell me that, I suppose?" she whispered to Shirley.

"Oh, no, I only——"

"Go back, and tell him to save some time for

me after this dance. I 'll keep the next one for him."

"But, Olive, you know he does n't dance ——"

"I 'll sit it out with him, since he does n't know enough to come and ask me for himself."

Half an hour later Jane, passing through the hall with Murray, on the way to the library, where he was to show her certain books of which they had been talking, caught sight of her brother just mounting the staircase to the retreat on the landing. To her surprise and relief — for she had anxiously looked for him from time to time, and had seen him with nobody but little Shirley — she noted that he was now in the company of his girlish hostess, and that that young person was turning upon him a gracious face.

To Jane the remainder of the evening passed in full pleasure. She spent an interesting hour in the library with Murray, who made himself a delightful companion, expanding in the sympathetic atmosphere of her good comradeship into a more genial warmth and sincerity of manner than she had imagined him capable of showing. Then Forrest came in search of her, and bore her away to join a company of young people who were going to supper together.

Under Forrest's wing she found her position secure, for he was a much-admired youth, and

whatsoever girl he chose to favour must — as he had known — be treated with friendliness by all his companions. Jane's own charms came to her aid also, and brought several unattached young gentlemen to her side, so that before the evening was over she had made what Forrest inwardly congratulated himself upon as "a respectable success."

Upon the landing Peter established Olive and himself on the divan among the palms. He studied his companion's face a moment, then said abruptly, "I want to tell you, Miss Townsend, that I 'm more than sorry to be here by an accident."

She looked up at him, startled, but met only a quiet smile. "How did you — I did n't mean you ——"

"I know you did n't — and you were very kind not to show how you must have felt. Perhaps it would be in better taste for me not to mention it at all. But I wanted you to know that I appreciated your courtesy in accepting the situation."

"But how ——"

"I found out — from a little slip of Miss Shirley's. I wanted to go home, of course, but — I could n't make up my mind to spoil my sister's evening, and besides — I thought your brother's invitation made it right for us to be here."

Olive's dark face was colouring warmly She looked down at her roses, wondering what to say. Somehow she found herself unwilling to let Peter Bell think she did n't want him at her party, for it was becoming clear to her that she did.

"I 'm so sorry," she murmured. "But I 'm very glad you did n't go home. If I had known you longer I 'm sure I should have invited ——"

"Don't bother to explain," urged Peter's low voice. "I did n't tell you to make you uncomfortable. Perhaps you won't mind my saying that looking on at this sort of thing is very interesting to me. I 've never seen it before."

"How do you like it?" asked Olive, glancing up at him curiously.

Peter laughed, looking off for a moment toward the drawing-room. "I 'm an outdoor sort of chap, I think," he said. "Yet it 's very pretty, all that down there, and I like to look at it. Miss Townsend, do you ride horseback much?"

"Sometimes — not often. I don't care for it."

"Neither should I, down the boulevard or in the park, but out on a country road. I 'm a country boy, and I like a good gallop down the old Northboro Road — miles of it as smooth as a floor. As for cross-country — ah, there 's sport!"

"I 've never seen you ride."

Peter's face changed. "No, I don't ride now," he said.

"But you have Saturday afternoons free?"

"Oh, yes."

"There are three saddle-horses in the stable," said Olive, making a sudden resolve, "and only one of them gets much use. Would you — care to take me for a gallop down the Northboro Road some day?"

That she should make such a proposition as this would have seemed to Olive Townsend but an hour before preposterous. But now, looking up at the sturdy figure before her, noting the wistful smile with which Peter had spoken of past experiences, it had come to her all at once that a new pleasure might be hers. She saw plainly that she should not be ashamed of Peter as an escort anywhere.

Peter stared at his hostess for a moment as if he could hardly believe that he had heard aright. "Do you really mean that, Miss Townsend?" he asked.

"Indeed I do. I 'm not in the habit of saying things I don't mean."

"Then, thank you, I should like it immensely," he said, with a smile and bow, more attractive, Olive admitted to herself, than any she had received that evening.

CHAPTER VI

WEEDS AND FLOWERS

"GOOD morning, Miss Jane Bell! May I come in?"

Jane lifted her head quickly from over the phlox-bed she was weeding in the little garden back of the house, to see Forrest Townsend looking over the wooden gate which shut away the garden from the surrounding neighborhood.

"Good morning! Yes, indeed, come in," she responded blithely, waving a discarded white ruffled sunbonnet at her guest. He vaulted over the low barrier and came swinging down the narrow path to the end of the enclosure, where the phlox-bed lay. Here he stood still, regarding with favour the girl in the blue dress, whose bronze-tinted hair glinted in the early June sunlight.

"Always busy at something, are n't you?" he said, tipping over a bushel-basket half-filled with weeds, and seating himself upon it. "Yes, I know I 've spilled out the weeds, but I 'll pick 'em up again when I 'm through. I came over to have a serious talk with you, and I 've got to be down here near you, where I can look you in

the eye. The grass is too damp yet to sit on in white trousers."

Jane laughed. "It can't be a very serious matter that's troubling you, or you would n't think of your clothes."

"It is serious, though. I 'm full of it, and can't stop to talk about the weather, so here goes. — I 've quarelled with my father."

Jane, who had thus far not ceased her weeding, stopped work and sat still to look at her neighbour. He met her gaze defiantly.

"Yes, I know. You think this is another case of schoolboy heroics, like the last fuss I told you I had with him —"

"I wish you would n't tell me."

"I 've got to tell somebody. Come, Jane — you 've grown to seem like the best friend I have — don't turn the cold shoulder on me just when I need you. You know what my mother and sister are like ——"

With a gesture of disapproval Jane turned away to her work.

Forrest watched her for a moment in silence; then he began again:

"All right, I won't complain if you 'll just let me tell you about this last scrape. There 's nobody else I can talk to — you know enough about us to know that."

"There ought to be. Your brother ——"

"Oh, Murray! With all respect to him—since you insist on respect—he 's not off the same piece of cloth with me, and can't understand me any more than I can him. His blood is n't good red blood at all; it's white, I think, and I ——"

Jane rose up from her knees and stood above her visitor, determination on her frank face.

"Forrest Townsend," said she, "if you can talk to me without running down your family, I 'll listen, but not otherwise. I don't think you ought to tell me your affairs at all, but if you 're sure I can be of use I 'll hear them, on that one condition."

Forrest studied her a moment without replying, while her clear hazel eyes returned his gaze. Then he laughed rather awkardly.

"You 're the soul of honour, are n't you?" he said. "And that's just why I need your advice. I don't want to do anything dishonourable, but I 'm in a corner, and don't see any way out except a jump over the wall. Let me tell you — please!"

Jane dropped upon her knees again and gave her attention to her work. Taking this as permission, Forrest began, picking up a long, pink-headed weed and pulling it through his fingers as he talked.

"I 've known all the while father wanted me in the house with him, and wanted me to go to college with that end in view. We 've had a few brushes on the subject from time to time, and I 've told him over and over I never meant to go to college, or to go into the business, either, but he 's thought it boy talk, I suppose. Anyhow, it turns out he's never taken me seriously when I 've told him I meant to live my own life in my own way. He had me tutored all last winter, to get me ready for my entrance examinations, and he expects me to go down and take them next week. That 's where I balked. He tackled me last night, and I had it out with him. The result was"— Forrest tried to keep up the nonchalant manner he had assumed when he began this explanation, but his voice showed his strong feeling as he ended the sentence —"the result was — he gave it to me hot and heavy, and I — talked back at him. In short, I ——"

Jane, her pretty lips set close together, her troubled eyes on the ground, listened anxiously for the words.

"You don't mean ——" she began, slowly.

Forrest nodded, and she caught the gesture. It brought her head round and her eyes to search his. "You did n't —say you would n't do what he wants?"

"I did — and meant it."

Jane drew a long breath. She forgot her weeding and sat back upon the walk, pulling off her gloves. Forrest waited silently for her first comment.

"Imagine my brother Peter doing that," she murmured.

"I can't imagine it — though Peter 's no soft-head. But your father's human, Jane. Mine — is n't."

"Oh, he is — he is! Don't say that! He may seem stern and hard, but that 's only on the surface, I 'm sure."

"Much you know about it!" muttered Forrest. "But, anyhow, hard or not, I 'm not going to be put into a business life I hate."

"What would you like to do?"

"Go into the army."

Jane stared at him, astonished. This idle youth live that sort of life? Her lips curved slowly into a smile, at which Forrest promptly took umbrage.

"See here," he said, sitting up straight, "you 're not to judge me, you know, from what you 've seen of me in the two months you 've lived in Gay Street. I 've been on vacation, I admit, ever since my tutor left in March. Besides, it 's not enlisting as a private I 'm thinking of — no, no! I want

to enter the army by the way of West Point, and get my lieutenant's commission at graduation. That 's a very different thing."

"Yes, that 's true. It means, I believe, four years of the severest training in the world. I know a boy who went — he could n't stand it."

Forrest flushed hotly under his fair skin. "And you think I could n't. That settles it. I 'll go, if only to prove you 're mistaken."

The girl looked up quickly, startled by his tone. "Ah, please," she began, "don't talk that way. Tell me — will your brother go into the business?"

"Not much! His health settles that for him. Besides, he 's too bookish, and father 'll let him do what he pleases, anyway — he does n't mind having one son of that stripe. But the other son — he must go into the mill, whether he wants to or not!"

"Could you get to West Point without your father's permission? Don't you have to be sent by somebody — your Congressman, is n't it?"

"Oh, there 's a lot of red tape, and father could block the whole game, I suppose. If he does — well, I 'd enlist and get into the ranks and work my way up, rather than go into that dingy old office and tie myself to a desk and a telephone."

Forrest got upon his feet as he spoke, brushed a clinging weed leaf or two from his clothes, and stood looking gloomily down at Jane, who had risen also. "It 's evident I get no sympathy from you," he said. "I thought you were a girl who could understand a fellow's ambitions — not wet-blanket them."

Jane looked up at him, smiling, although her eyes were still troubled. "I can, I think," she said. "Yet — somehow — I 'm imagining the disappointment it must be to a father who has built up a great business like Townsend & Company's to have his son take no interest in it. I can't help thinking —"

"What?" — as Jane paused abruptly.

"Never mind."

"But I want to know what you can't help thinking."

"Well, I 'm wondering if it would be any harder for you to go into your father's office than it is for Peter to work with my father in the note-paper factory. Do you know what Peter wants to be?"

"No. I know he has a good position for his age, with the Armstrongs."

"Yes, but Peter wants — has wanted for six years — to be a chemist — an expert, you know. Oh, I 'm not sure I ought to tell you — please

never speak of it. Even father does n't know it 's any more than a boy's fancy. Peter could n't afford the years of training, of course — and father can't spare him. There are" — as Forrest looked surprised — "more people dependent on father and the boys than you know of — and I must n't tell you. All I want you to know is that" — Jane smiled wistfully — "there are other people who can't have their own way — and who are making the best of it, and pretty bravely, too."

Mrs. Bell came to the door of the house, and with a pleasant nod and smile to Forrest, told Jane that a certain bowl of bread-dough had reached a critical condition of lightness. The girl picked up her basket, and Forrest bent to toss into it the weeds he had thrown out.

"Please don't feel I 'm an unsympathetic listener," begged Jane, as her visitor took his leave.

"I won't. I know you mean it all right. I just think you don't understand all the facts in the case. Much obliged to you for hearing me out. If I turn up missing some day, you 'll know you did your part, and gave me the proper grandmotherly advice." And Forrest swung away through the gate with a reckless air, which Jane thought rather melodramatic, and quite in keeping

with a certain staginess sometimes apparent in the youth's bearing.

Jane's acquaintance with Olive Townsend had progressed very slowly. Olive was not a girl who possessed the gift of making many warm friendships. She was not well liked even by the young people of her own chosen circle. Girl visitors were not frequent at the Townsend house, and Olive was seldom seen coming or going with one or another of such friends. Yet there was something about her personality which held a strong attraction for Jane, and made her want to know Olive well.

When Peter returned from his first horseback ride in Olive's company, Jane had waited with interest for his description of the event. Peter always told Jane his experiences — for the reason, perhaps, that she never demanded them from him, never betrayed his confidences, and invariably showed her appreciation of his comradeship.

"She 's an odd girl," said Peter to Jane. "She seemed principally occupied, for the first two miles, in noticing how I rode, whether I kept elbows in, head up, back stiff, like herself, and whether I held my whip in the proper position. We jogged along at a fussy little pace, talking about nothing in particular, and minding our p's

and q's as if we were at Professor Miller's riding academy, with the eye of the master on us."

"I hope she was satisfied with your correct style," Jane said. "I saw you start, and I thought you looked more at home in the saddle than she."

"I probably am. After riding everything on grandfather's farm ever since I was a little shaver, and breaking every colt he had for the three years we lived there, I ought to feel fairly comfortable on a model saddle-horse like the one she gave me. She 's been trained in the school, which leaves a lot of things to be desired, to my way of thinking. She broke loose all right, though, when I got my chance to show her what my idea of the sport is."

Peter's face took on a comical expression, and Jane hurried him on with an eager "Well?"

"We got out on the Northboro Road. You know that long stretch where there are so few houses — just a sort of lane between big trees, shady and cool, and the road like a training-track at this time of year?"

Jane nodded.

"I proposed that we let out a reef or two. She agreed, and we broke into a baby canter. I kept hitting up the pace a little. Her horse caught the idea, and began to quicken. She

bumped about a bit, but I saw she would know how to stay on, even if she moved faster than she ever had before. Just as we got up a fairly decent speed, one of those little *crack-a-cracks* of motor-cycles came bursting out of a driveway, and both our horses shied and threatened to bolt.

"It was nothing, you know; they were over it in a jiffy, and she kept her seat all right, and showed she was game. But it stirred both horses to take the rest of that stretch at as pretty a gallop as you 'd care to see; and when I saw the girl was all right, I shouted, 'Come on!' and let them have it. I tell you, she forgot the riding academy and Professor Miller, and rode for fair. It was jolly good fun, and she enjoyed it, too."

Peter laughed reminiscently. Jane remarked that she had noticed Olive's masses of black hair were not in quite such trim shape when she came home from that ride as upon setting forth; and Peter admitted that upon that joyous gallop she had dropped not only her whip, but most of her hairpins, of which latter articles he had been able to recover for her only a few.

"That 's all the girl needs," he observed, sagely. "Just shake out a few of her hairpins each time you 're with her, and she 'll learn how to be good friends with you."

"I don't have much chance to shake out her hairpins," Jane objected.

"You will. You 're to go next time — some day when her brother Forrest is away, and I can ride his horse and you the one I had. I told her a pitiful tale of how you loved to ride, how well you could do it, and——"

"Peter!"

"Oh, I did n't whine — just let her know I was n't the only horseman in the family. She 'll ask you — see if she does n't; if she does n't I won't go myself."

Olive did not ask Jane, however, and after one more ride with her, Peter suddenly became too busy to accept her invitations. Olive went off by herself one day, suffered a fall and a sprained shoulder, and was thereby initiated at last into Jane's friendship.

"My sister sent me over," said Murray Townsend, one June evening, to Jane, who, hemming a tiny ruffle, sat in the western sunlight upon the little back porch, where the family now spent their evenings, enjoying the first blossomings of the small garden. "She's been fretting all day with that shoulder of hers she hurt last week, and vows she can't get through the evening with me. The others are all away — as usual. Won't you do us the favour of coming over?"

"Was it really her suggestion — or yours?" Jane challenged him, for it was not the first time he had made the attempt, upon one excuse or or another, to get her across the street.

"Hers, on my honour, though I 'll admit I seconded the motion. She really wants you. She's lying on a couch round on the side porch. It 's a jolly place, or would be if it — had you in it," he nearly said, but discreetly substituted — "had such a nice crowd in it as this."

He glanced from one to another of the group upon the little porch. Ross was softly breathing notes from a flute. Mr. and Mrs. Bell sat side by side, in happy comradeship. Peter, his long legs extending well out upon the grass before the porch, whittled at a bit of wood; and Nancy, close beside her cousin Ross, was holding for him a page of music, which he evidently was trying for the first time.

"Stay with them, if you 'd like to," suggested Jane, softly, as she put away her work and prepared to accept his invitation. "You know they always like to have you — every one of them — and I can slip across by myself. I 'll take her some of my mignonette and June roses."

"Thank you for your kind permission," answered Murray, following Jane's white-clad

figure slowly down to the mignonette-bed at the farther end of the garden, "but I 'd rather accept it some evening when Miss Jane Bell is to be at home. 'Hamlet' with Ophelia left out would n't be much more of a play than it would be minus the melancholy gentleman himself."

Armed with a great bunch of the fragrant blossoms from the garden, Jane accompanied Murray across Gay Street, through the gate in the high hedge, and over the lawn and round the house to the great sheltered porch on the other side, its tall columns making it as great a contrast to the miniature place she had just left as could be imagined. Rugs carpeted the floor, big bamboo and rush chairs invited repose, and screens hung ready to be dropped, and to shut it quite away from invading breezes.

On a wide, richly cushioned settee lay Olive, listless and unhappy. She scanned Jane closely, noted that her visitor was not less attractively, if far less expensively, dressed than herself, and lifted to her face eyes into which had suddenly come a look of relief and interest.

"For me?" she asked, as Jane put the flowers into her outstretched hands. "Oh, how sweet! Why don't we have such mignonette as that in our gardens?"

"There are a lot of flowers," thought Murray,

as he watched Jane take her seat by his sister and begin to entertain her, "that they grow in Gay Street which we don't know the smell of over here. If we could just transplant the one I brought over to-night, what a beginning of a garden we should have!"

CHAPTER VII

JANE PUTS A QUESTION

ON HER way home from a trip to a not far-distant fruit-shop, Nancy Bell caught sight of her friend, Shirley Townsend, waving an eagerly summoning hand from the gateway in the hedge.

It was a hot morning in early July, and Nancy, after running into the house to report her return to her mother, joined Shirley in a shady corner under the shrubbery, which had become a favourite trysting-place of the two children.

Half an hour afterward Nancy, her eyes wide with excitement, sought out her mother and Jane upon the small back porch, where each was busy with the morning's work — at this moment the looking-over of raspberries and the shelling of peas.

"O mother — O Jane!" the child began, "the dreadfullest thing has happened over at the big house! Forrest Townsend's run away, and they don't know where he is!"

"Why, Nan!" Jane's busy fingers, red with

raspberry stains, stopped their work, as she stared at her sister in dismay. "That can't be so!"

"Yes, it can — it is! Shirley told me. He's been gone three days, but they thought he must be off on a visit till they got a letter this morning. And they don't even know where the letter was mailed from. Mrs. Townsend's sick in bed about it, and Shirley says her father won't say a word — just looks white and angry and queer."

"The poor father and mother!" murmured Mrs. Bell, her eyes full of sympathy.

"But he can't have gone away to stay," said Jane, staring at Nancy, still incredulous. "He's an impulsive fellow—quick tempered, hot-headed — and he and his father don't get on well together. But to run away ——"

"But he has," persisted Nancy. "The letter said it was no use looking for him; he'd come back some time when he'd shown he could look after his own — oh, I don't remember just what he said — Shirley was n't sure what it meant. But she said her mother just cried and cried, and told her father she'd always known his harsh ways ——"

"Don't, dear — don't tell us!" Mrs. Bell interrupted, quickly. "Shirley should n't have told you anything that was said; we have no right to know. When people are hurt and sad, they

say bitter things they are very sorry for afterward. The only thing for us to know is that this trouble has come to our neighbours. We must think how we can help them. I would go over at once if I thought I could be of use to poor Mrs. Townsend — and were sure she was willing I should know."

They discussed the situation, Mrs. Bell and Jane, as they went on with their work; and Jane told her mother all she knew of Forrest's differences with his father. "It bothers me so," she ended, sorrowfully, "that I did n't realise he was in earnest about taking things into his own hands, and do something to let the others know. Do you suppose that foolish threat about enlisting in the army could really have been what he meant to do? Do you suppose he has done it?"

"It is a possible clue. I think they ought to know it, if they have nothing else to guide them. When your father comes home I will talk with him about it, and he may think it best to go to Mr. Townsend himself, tell him what we know, and offer to help."

But it proved not necessary to wait until the evening to consult about offering sympathy and counsel to the troubled family in Worthington Square. Early in the afternoon, while Mrs. Bell lay resting in her room, and Nancy and Jane sat in

the shadow of one of the big maples at the end of the garden — their special retreat on hot days — the tap of Murray's cane was heard on the walk outside.

"Run into the house, dear, please!" Jane whispered, quickly. "It 's Murray, and I believe he 's come to talk with me about Forrest."

Her surmise proved correct, as she knew from her first glance at the pale face and grave eyes of her friend. He was her friend — that she had come to know very clearly in the last few weeks — her friend in quite a different way from that in which Forrest had shown her friendship. There had developed a genuine congenialty of interests between the quiet, book-loving youth and the girl who had not gone to college, but who was persistently giving herself the higher education she longed for. Books he was lending her, lessons in French and German he had been lately begging to be allowed to give her, and many inspiring talks he had with her on the subjects both loved, whenever a chance offered or he could make one.

So now, as Murray came toward her, his eyes fixed upon her as if he were sure that here he would find something he sorely needed, Jane felt an added longing to show her power to be of use in time of trouble; and dropping her book

— one that belonged to Murray — she came forward to meet him with outstretched hand, and a look which showed him that she already understood.

"You 've heard?" he asked, in surprise. "I don't know how, but I 'm glad, for I dreaded to tell it."

"Shirley told Nancy — just the bare facts — and of course my little sister told my mother and me. We 've been thinking of you all ever since, wishing we could help you."

"You can; we need you. Even mother feels it. Olive says when she asked her if she wanted a nurse, she refused to have one except her maid, but said, 'I wish I dared to ask that kind-faced Mrs. Bell. I feel as if she could tell me what to do.'"

"Mother will be so glad. She will go over by and by. She loves to help people, and always knows how better than anybody else in the world."

"I can believe it. She makes a fellow feel as if he belonged to her, somehow, and she was interested in him."

"She is — that's why she makes you feel so.— Come over here in the shade, please, and tell me what I can do."

Murray dropped upon the grass beside Jane's low chair with a sigh of weariness, and ran his

hand through the thick locks of his hair, pushing them away from his forehead with an impatient gesture, as if he would like thus easily to clear away the clouds which bothered him.

"You see," he began slowly, "I feel more or less responsible myself for this outbreak. I can't help thinking that if things had been between us as they ought to be between brothers Forrest would have brought his notions and troubles to me."

"But you— but he ——" Jane paused, surprised at the tone he took. "You have n't been able to be with Forrest much, because — because he has been so active and lived such a different life ——"

"You are kind to excuse me, but I don't see how that makes it any better. I could have shown interest and sympathy enough with his tastes and plans to have made him come naturally to me. I 'm the elder brother, and I have n't been a brother, only a querulous, fault-finding, elderly relative, as if he were fourteen and I forty. He did come to you with his grievances against father, did n't he?"

Jane coloured a little as his eyes keenly questioned her.

"Yes, though I did n't want him to tell me, and would n't listen to very much of it. I felt guilty to let him talk at all, but he was so ——"

"I 'm glad you did. If anybody could have given him advice that he would take it would have been you. I was pretty sure he had been to you, by the way I saw him fling over here just after he 'd had a bout with father."

"He said something that day I feel as if your father ought to know, and I 've been wondering how I could let him know," and with this introduction, Jane told Murray all she had learned of Forrest's inclination toward the army and its varied experiences, ending as gently as she could with the boyish threat of enlisting if he could not bring about his own appointment to West Point. Murray listened to her very soberly.

"Father would veto the West Point proposition from the first word," he said, "merely because he has no notion of the sort of fascination the idea would have for a restless chap like my brother. So if Forrest asked him to let him go, I 've no doubt he refused him, and then — well, I can easily imagine Forrest carrying out his threat out of pure bravado. It gives us something to go by, anyhow. We can soon find out if he 's had the folly to enlist. He may have the dash and bravery to do a gallant deed, to fight stoutly enough at a time of need, but the patience and endurance for the every-day army life ——" He

shook his head. "He's only a boy, you know. You could n't expect it of him."

Just here Peter opened the little garden gate and came swinging in. "Hello!" he called, at sight of the pair under the maple-tree "You two look cool and restful out there. May I join the picnic party when I 've freshened up a bit? A breakdown in the power at the factory sent fifty or sixty of us in our department home for a quarter-holiday."

"That 's luck for us, too!" called back Murray, cordially.

Jane bent forward eagerly. "Do you mind Peter's knowing?" she asked. "Pete's so big and strong and — ingenious; he 's like mother at knowing what to do."

"I want Peter to know," Murray replied, without hesitation. "We 're going to try to keep this thing out of the papers, of course, and away from our acquaintances as long as we can, but your family must all know. I feel, somehow, as if having the Bell family stand by us would be worth a lot."

When Peter came out, in fresh clothes, his brown hair damp from the splashing shower he had just taken, and joined the two others under the maple, he was told the whole story. He listened in clear-eyed gravity, with once or twice a short

exclamation of regret. As Murray ended with Jane's suggestion about the runaway's possible enlistment in the army, Peter drew a long breath.

"I believe I can understand how he felt about it," he said, throwing his head back and staring up at the sky for a moment. Then, coming back to earth with a squaring of his broad shoulders, he added, with a rueful smile at Jane, "And that 's not because my home isn 't the happiest one on earth. It 's just the feeling a fellow gets once in a while that he 'd like to jump over something and make a dash for the horizon line— to see what 's beyond it! And I can see how he ——" Then he broke off suddenly, looking at Murray. "That does n't mean I don't appreciate what this is to all his family. And if there's anything I can do to help, I 'm your man."

"You 'd be a good one to send after him," Murray answered, with a slight smile. "You 'd know better than to pounce on him like an officer of the law. You' d treat him like a brother — a better brother than I 've been,"— and the smile faded.

"Look here, don't take it that way. There are few brothers I know who stand shoulder to shoulder as they ought to do. It 's odd, but it's so, and a pity it is, too. I think our family is different from most — for the reason ——"

Here Peter stopped abruptly once more, meeting Jane's eyes. He could not say that early training, given by wise parents, had made all the difference in the world with their family life.

"Yes, I fancy I know the reason," said Murray, wistfully, "and I congratulate you on it."

"I 'm a stupid sort of Job's comforter," Peter went on. "But one thing is sure; if you 'd like an extra brother, to stand by in this difficulty, here he is."

He laid his hand on Murray's arm as he spoke, and Murray flushed with pleasure. He turned and held out his own hand, and Peter's closed on it with a grip. Then both began to talk with a will about other things.

When Murray went home he took Mrs. Bell with him. He watched her vanish through the doorway of his mother's room, where that poor lady had been all day in a state of nervous prostration, and felt that he had brought her a friend worth while.

The moment that his father came home Murray went to him with the news he had obtained in Gay Street. The two had a long conference, during which Murray discovered his father to be watching him with a peculiar expression, as if surprised to find this reserved son so ready with suggestions.

Mr. Townsend shook his head over the notion that Forrest could have carried his revolt against authority so far as to have taken the step of enlisting in the army; but when Murray urged that the clue should be followed up, the elder man said slowly:

"I don't know whether it would do any good to hunt him up and bring him home. He 's taken things into his own hands. I feel like letting him manage his own affairs for a while. He has n't the force of character to deprive himself of the comforts of life very long. If he has enlisted, he 'd better take the consequences. I 'm not so sure but a term of service in the army would do him good, take the conceit out of him, and show him that he cannot escape discipline anywhere; — life itself means discipline of one sort or another."

"If we should find he had enlisted, then, you would n't take the steps to get him off? You could, you know, sir, since he 's under age. Peter says so."

"Peter? Peter who?"

"Peter Bell — in Gay Street."

"Oh, yes. You see a good deal of the Bells, Murray?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't think I should apply to have him

released from service," said Mr. Townsend, slowly, grim lines settling about his mouth.

A week went by. At its close a second briefly letter arrived from Forrest, addressed to his mother. It stated that Forrest had enlisted in the army, and had, at his own application, been allowed to join a regiment just leaving for San Francisco, to be sent for a term of three years' service in the Philippines. By the time the letter reached home, Forrest would have sailed.

The letter was written in a spirit of boyish bravado, like the first, but although it upset Mrs. Townsend again and sent her back to her bed, it relieved the tension of the family. It furnished definite news of the young fellow's whereabouts, and made it possible to communicate with him when he should have reached his destination.

Mrs. Townsend spent many days thereafter in urging her husband to apply at headquarters to have her son returned. It could be done, she was sure, because the boy was but nineteen, and having enlisted without his father's permission, must have misrepresented his age at the recruiting-station. But Mr. Townsend remained firm. He said that Forrest, having chosen this course, must abide by it, at least for

the term of service for which he had enlisted. He would not have a turncoat for a son, he said sternly, although with a suspicious lowering of the voice; and he was more and more impressed with the conviction that the hard realities of life would make a man out of Forrest if the stuff of which men are made was in him.

"Meanwhile," he said to Murray, with a sadness which the other detected, "it is the father, rather than the son, after all, who has the bitterest dose of medicine to take."

"I 'm sorry, sir," was all Murray could say, wondering if his father meant the fact that his plan for taking Forrest into the business would have to be given up.

He suggested this to Jane Bell, in the little garden one evening, down by the phlox-bed, where she had gone to pick a bunch of flowers for Olive, who sat upon the porch with Ross and Peter. Olive had at last learned the way over to Gay Street, and having found it, had discovered that the knowledge lent interest to a life she had felt to be very dull.

"I suppose he feels badly about it," said Murray, holding the phlox Jane gave him while she picked a cluster of lilies to go with it.

"Indeed, he must."

"It is the thing he has looked forward to

for years — ever since he realised he could n't make a business man out of me."

"Yes, and I suppose, even if your brother came back after two or three years, less headstrong than now, he might not be any more willing to settle down to that life."

"No, I doubt if he would. It's all up for father, and it's a tremendous disappointment."

"I am very, very sorry for him," said Jane, gravely, musing over her lilies. There was silence for a moment; then she looked up. "You don't think," she ventured, her hazel eyes scanning his, "that anybody could possibly make it up to him?"

"Anybody? Who?"

"Who, indeed?" Jane was breathing a little quickly.

Murray stared at her in mingled astonishment, questioning and dismay. Then he spoke, abruptly and roughly: "In the name of all absurdity, you can't mean *me*?"

Jane dropped her eyes, flushing deeply. She bit her lips. "It would be very, very hard, would n't it?"

Murray drew a deep, impatient breath. "*Hard!*" he exploded, and turned away. Then he wheeled back. "You 're not serious?" he said, hurriedly. "You can't be serious in even

suggesting such a thing. I — bookworm, cripple, weakling ——"

Jane raised her eyes once more. In the deepening twilight Murray felt as if they were searching his soul.

"And yet," she said, slowly, and almost wistfully, "it would be such a magnificent thing to do. It would take hero stuff, I know —yet," she smiled, "I think —you — could ——" Then she stopped short. "Oh, forgive me!" she cried, softly, under her breath. "What am I that I should suggest hero deeds to you? A girl who cries nearly every night of her life because she can't go to college!"

CHAPTER VIII

MURRAY GIVES AN ANSWER

"I WISH I knew," observed Olive Townsend to Jane Bell, "what in the world is the matter with Murray. He acts as if he had lost his head completely. I went into his room this morning, and almost fell over a pile of Indian clubs and dumb-bells; and I saw a set of chest weights hanging against the wall. It's the queerest thing! He's never gone in for that sort of thing at all — and I should n't think he was strong enough for it, either."

The two girls were driving along the park roadway in a high-hung phaeton of Olive's, behind a very smartly harnessed horse. This was the third time Olive had asked Jane to drive with her, and although Jane would have enjoyed excursions into the country much more than these drives about the fashionable city streets, she appreciated the honour Olive meant to do her in thus exhibiting their friendship to all beholders. Olive had grown to be rather proud of Jane's company upon these drives, for she

was conscious that they attracted considerable admiring attention, and she fancied that Jane's quiet daintiness of attire set off her own rather more striking style.

Jane laughed at the notion that Murray was not strong enough to put himself in the way of being stronger. She knew it was Peter who had suggested this course of proceedings in response to an envious comment from Murray, when he had seen Peter scantily garbed for some severe physical labor about the house.

"Biceps?" Peter had laughed, as Murray grasped the sinewy arm and expressed his admiration for the fine development thereof. "And deltoid? — Oh yes, that's easy. If your particular form of daily toil does n't give you muscle where you want it, get it for yourself with exercise. You can build up anything you like in a gymnasium — or in your own room, if you have the persistence."

"You could, with your splendid health to begin on, of course," Murray replied, with a sigh, for he had begun to suspect that Peter's unusual level-headedness and efficiency came in considerable degree from his well-developed body.

"So could you. A year of solid work with a good instructor would make another chap of you. Two years, an athlete."

"Oh, no — not with my constitution."

"Your constitution, man!" Peter had almost shouted. "What's constitution? Something to be made just about what you will of. Fellows with a direct tendency toward consumption have made themselves giants by living outdoors and sawing wood."

This had been the beginning, the first result of which serious talk had been the dumb-bells and chest-weights which had called forth Olive's suspicion of her brother's sanity.

"But he's never cared for anything but books — and to be let alone," objected Olive, when Jane replied that she thought nothing better could happen to Murray than to become interested in building up his physical being. "It 's just since Forrest has been gone — only think, that 's six weeks now — that Murray has been at this."

"It's telling on him already, too," said Jane, feeling a sense of elation over the fact which she could not quite account for. "He has a better colour. I noticed it yesterday."

"That was sunburn," declared Olive, skeptically. "He spent the afternoon lying on the ground with a book down by the hedge, right squarely in the hot August sun. I think it was ridiculous."

"He's lived in the house ever so much more than was good for him," Jane insisted, gently.

"So does everybody in cities. My idea of happiness — one sort — is a day on my grandfather's farm. It 's only about ten miles out, and we 've a plan. Should you, Murray, and Shirley, care to spend a day with us out there? A sort of picnic, you know. Down by the river there are the loveliest places you can imagine, and Peter says he 'll take you fishing if you care for it."

"Indeed I should, I 'm sure," agreed Olive, with real pleasure. She loved new sensations, and the notion of going fishing with Peter Bell appealed to her strongly. She was growing more and more to respect and admire Peter; in a way, it was true, in which she quite failed to appreciate his best qualities, but in which she responded, nevertheless, to those which his family would have rated as his second best.

"Don't forget the picnic," was Olive's last word, as she set Jane down at her own door. "I shall begin to get an outing hat ready now."

"If I should forget, Peter would remind me It 's his plan," Jane reassured her — a fact which of itself pleased Olive, for she was confident that it meant his regard for her entertainment.

If she had known, however, the whole plan was a plot of Peter's for Murray's diversion.

"The fellow 's worrying about something," Peter had said. "He's pitching into the exercises

I showed him, but his mind 's counting against him. I know what he wants to build himself up for. He told me that if he had to be the family's sole representative in the matter of sons for the next three years, he wanted to put up a better showing, and I 'm decidedly glad he takes it that way. I 'd hate myself to be five feet ten and weigh only one hundred and thirty. Let 's take him — and the girls if you like — out for a day on Grandfather Bell's farm. What do you say? Do you suppose we could make the thing acceptable to Miss Worthington Square?" After due consideration of the matter, and some consultation with her mother, Jane had enthusiastically agreed. Now, upon returning from the drive, she was able to tell Peter that Olive had accepted the invitation with alacrity.

"What — fishing and all?" he laughed. "Really, I think better of her ladyship than ever for coming down to earth like that. The question is now, how to get them there without resorting to hay-wagons — a form of conveyance I judge Miss Olive would n't deign to accept."

"Imagine one rolling up to the *porte-cochère* on the Worthington Square front!" and Jane broke into such a merry laugh that everybody joined in — for Jane had told Peter her news at the dinner-table.

"Let Miss Olive and Murray and Shirley drive in their own trap, and have Pete bring out grandfather's new surrey for us. I 'm sure it 's as trim a looking vehicle as any, if his horses don't have quite the smartest harness going," suggested Ross McAndrew. "The horses themselves are crack-a-jacks."

"That will have to do, I think," Jane agreed, "though it seems too bad to ask our guests to take themselves."

"No matter in what order we go, you 'll find we 'll come home democratically mixed up," prophesied Ross. "I defy Miss Worthington Square to withstand the leveling influences of a day on Grandfather Bell's farm. I 've no doubt Peter will drive the trap home, with Rufe hanging on the back seat, and Murray will learn what it means to coax a pair of shy farm horses past the electric cars. As for me, I may come home as jockey on young Major's back, the city youth having proved not up to the situation."

With such merry comments the preparation for the picnic was made. And if the Bells had known it, their guests looked forward to the affair with quite as pleasant anticipations as themselves. When the day came — a sultry August morning, with signs of thunder-showers in the west — Olive and Murray and Shirley

found themselves as willing to risk a possible wetting as the Bells themselves, who never minded such small things as thunder-showers in the least.

The farm horses — Grandfather Bell's pride, and with reason, for they were a fine pair of blacks — led the way, the new surrey carrying such a jolly company that the guests, following close behind in the smart trap, tried in vain to rival their hilarity. The three Townsends were all arrayed in white linen from head to foot, and presented a cool and attractive spectacle; but Murray's eyes watched with envy the parti-coloured group in the conveyance ahead, and Olive reluctantly owned to herself that Jane's fresh little blue cotton frock, while better suited to a farm picnic than one of white linen, was also a charming spot of colour upon the landscape.

"Now, who's going fishing?" called back Peter, as he drove his steeds briskly in through Grandfather Bell's gateway, followed by the trap at its best pace. "It's clouding over now, so that we ought to have some good sport — if the rain holds off, and I think it will, judging by the wind. Grandfather Bell can tell us that," he added, as a tall old man of a hale and vigorous aspect came out of the house to greet his guests.

"The rain won't bother you before afternoon,

I guess," prophesied Grandfather Bell, shaking hands cordially with his guests. "When it does, you 'd better put for the house. You can have your picnic indoors, where you won't get your clothes wet," and his glance fell on the three white-clad young people from the city.

"Never mind our clothes," said Murray. "We were thinking of the hot day coming when we put them on. It would have been more sensible to dress like you fellows," and he glanced from Ross's worn gray corduroys to Peter's faded blue flannels, in which costumes both young men looked ruggedly — and not unattractively — ready for roughing it.

"Picnics appeal to people from different points of view," suggested Ross. "Now, Miss Olive can certainly sit on a rock and watch Peter, Rufe, Nan and myself fish, giving us practical suggestions from time to time — in a whisper. Perhaps she 'll photograph us with that camera she has there. But I would advise that Mr. Murray Townsend, Miss Shirley Townsend, and Miss Jane Bell, sit apart on some mossy bank and read some pleasant tale *about* fishing."

"Nonsense. You talk like a stage manager," jeered Peter. "Miss Olive 's going to do some real fishing if Grandmother Bell has to lend her a dress to go home in — and so are the rest

Fishing is the first thing on this programme and fishing is to be done. You saw to the rods and lines, Rufe — where are they?"

Rufe raced away to the barns, and came back with a full fishing equipment for everybody. After greeting Grandmother Bell, a pleasant little old lady, with a warm welcome for every one, the party proceeded through the orchard and down a long, maple-shaded lane to the river — a picturesque spot, which had been the paradise of the Bell family from its earliest recollections.

Here sport reigned for an hour, although few fish were caught. The spirit of hilarity ruled the holiday too thoroughly to admit of much wooing of the frightened prey; but nobody minded except Rufus, who finally left the others and wandered away up-stream, whence he returned after a time, triumphant, with a respectable showing of fish.

"The clouds don't look as threatening as they did. Could n't we climb that small hill on the other side of the river? I 've been looking at that winding path for an hour, wishing I could see where it leads," said Murray to Jane, propping his fishing-rod against a tree.

"It leads to a little hemlock grove, and a field of corn beyond," answered Jane, fanning her flushed and laughing face with her wide-brimmed hat.

"Oh, don't tell me! Come and explore it with me, will you?" Murray gave her such a pleading look that she could not refuse him, although she and Peter had agreed that this picnic was not to be a "pairing off" affair, because that would leave Ross in the lurch, and Ross had been working hard of late, and needed an outing, his cousins thought, more than anybody.

"We 'll just go over and back, if you like — to satisfy your curiosity," and Jane let him walk away with her.

They slowly climbed the hill path, Murray stopping to cut himself a stout staff in lieu of the cane he no longer used. "I shall always be lame," he said to Jane, "but I 'm not going to depend on canes any longer except for such special occasions as this. Do you know, I think I 'm growing a shade brawnier — thanks to Peter's training."

"I 'm sure you are; you look it," responded Jane, warmly, "and I 'm so glad."

"There has been wonderful work done in the world by people in ill health. But I 'm afraid I could never be a Carlyle or a Stevenson, no matter how bright the fires of genius burned. They worked for the love of it, but when the task a fellow sees before him is one he dislikes, he certainly needs the backing of a sound body."

As they attained the top of the hill, panting a little for breath, Murray stared ahead into the hemlock grove.

"That 's a cool-looking spot. Can't we sit down there a few minutes? I 'll have to rest a bit before I do more," he urged. "It 's three years since I climbed a hill like that — just the day before I had my accident. I seem to have got started on the uninteresting subject of myself, so I may as well go on a little further and tell you my plans about the same chap, if you don't mind listening."

"I 'd love to hear them. Here 's a fine mossy spot, and two trees to lean against," and Jane dropped at the foot of one of the trees she had pointed out. Murray, casting aside his stick, threw himself down at full length near by, his arms clasped under his head.

"Ah, this is great!" he murmured. "Smell those balsams? It makes one want to live outdoors. And that 's what I 'm thinking of doing."

"Really? How? Will you pitch a tent on the lawn? That would be fine for you, and we should all envy you."

"No, I want a more radical change to outdoor life than that — or at least I want the results. I 've made up my mind that to live my life out

as a bookish invalid, if I might do better, is 'too poor a way of playing the game of life,' as one author I like immensely puts it. I shall stick to the books all I can, but—I want some good red blood in my veins besides."

Forrest's words spoken weeks ago, charging Murray with the very lack of "red blood," came to Jane's mind, and she smiled and sighed, thinking what a change those weeks had made in the relations of the two brothers. And here was Murray wishing for the very thing the want of which his vigorous brother had deplored.

"I 'm sure you can have it, and all the good things that go with it."

"Which are many, as you people have already taught me. Honestly, it 's seeing your family so alive and hearty and happy that's brought me to be dissatisfied with myself. I 'm going to have need of all I can put into Murray Townsend, and so—I 've about made up my mind——"

He hesitated, pulling a hemlock branch through his slim fingers with nervous energy. Then he began again: "I 've been reading a lot lately about life on one of those Western ranches—real ranch life, I mean; not Eastern play at it. I 've a cousin who went to Montana six years ago. I get a letter from him once in a while. He 's a Westerner now, full-fledged. I doubt

if he ever comes East again to stay. I 've written him to ask if he has any room for a tenderfoot on his ranch, and if he says he 'll take me in, I think I 'll go."

"Right away?"

"Right away, if father agrees — and I think he will. He 'll be only too glad to have me take the chance of making a man out of myself, instead of a bloodless bookworm." Murray turned over with a short laugh, and propping his chin on his elbows, lay looking at Jane.

"How long shall you stay?"

"Long enough to do the business. A year, if necessary. When I come back, I 'll probably be wearing leather leggings with fringes, a handkerchief round my neck, and a sombrero. I 've no doubt the cowboys will have played tricks enough on me to prove satisfactorily to all concerned whether I 'm a man or a mushroom."

Jane looked steadily down at the face below her, and realised that it was a face of strength as well as of fineness. The eyes which met hers were enlivened by a determination she had never seen in them before, and her answer brought into them a light which surprised and pleased her.

"I think it's the best plan in the world," she said, heartily, "and I know it will succeed.

Nobody ever set himself to accomplishing anything without accomplishing either that thing or something better."

"What could the 'something better' be in my case?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

The question was a challenge. Murray sat up. A tinge of red crept into his cheek. "Yes, I know," he answered. "So do you, I think. You put it into my head. Am I a coward, that I can't decide to give myself over to my father and the business?"

"No. But you are planning to put your shoulder to his wheel somehow — I know you are, or you would n't be trying so hard to strengthen that shoulder."

"You 're a wizard — or a witch." Murray spoke soberly; then he laughed, as the two pairs of eyes met, and he caught the fire in Jane's. "Are you always so sure of your friends?"

"Always. If I have a friend, I believe in — her — whether she wants me to or not. She always proves me right."

"Suppose it 's 'him'?"

"I don't know so much about the 'hims,'" said Jane, "except my brothers. The rule works with them."

"You must be an inspiring sister. You 've

brothers enough already, I suppose, but I wish you 'd adopt another. My sister — she can't be far from your age, but she seems years younger. She has n't thought about things the way you have. Look here! If I go to Montana for a year, I shall be pretty lonesome sometimes, I expect. Will you let me write to you?"

"It would be great fun," answered Jane, simply, "to have letters from a real cowboy with six-shooters in his belt."

"I 'll take them out when I write to you. Must we go back? Well, if you think we ought — though I 'd like to lie here all day and dream dreams about the great things I 'm going to do. But a fellow can't dream much in the society of the Bells — he has to be up and doing."

"'With a heart for any fate,'" quoted Jane, blithely, as she led the way. "I 'll tell you a better motto than that, though, fine as it is."

"What is it? Give it to me, will you?"

"I 'll write it out for you."

"When?"

"To-morrow, perhaps."

"To-day, please. I 'm an impatient chap."

"Very well. You shall have it when we get home. It 's one I can't talk about, somehow — it gives me a choke in my throat — I don't know why."

Hours later Murray found out why. By the time he and Jane had rejoined the rest of the party the threatening storm-clouds had brought the promised rain. The lunch had to be eaten in Grandmother Bell's pleasant kitchen, but the guests enjoyed it almost as much as they could have done in the sylvan spot that Peter had picked out. By three o'clock in the afternoon the storm had passed. It had cooled the air a little, so that it was possible for the party to spend three long and delightful hours upon the river before going home.

"We three in what was once white," said Murray, as he stood by the trap, "are a pretty sorry-looking crowd to go back all together. Why may I not change places with Peter, and drive the Bell family home?"

Ross chuckled as he winked at Jane, and she recalled his prophecy of some days earlier. But it was he and Nancy who took the back seat of the trap, leaving Rufus and Shirley in the surrey, to carry on an acquaintance which had developed to great friendliness in the Townsend tennis-court, where the children had played every evening throughout the summer.

Up in his own room Murray took from his pocket a slip of paper Jane had given him as she said good night, and unfolding it as if it

were a message from a royal hand, he read it slowly through. The expectation of this message had been warm all through the pleasant drive home in the twilight.

The words of Jane's quotation were these: — and as it happened that he had never seen them before, they came to him at this crisis of his life with peculiar force.

> "Life is an arrow — therefore you must know
> What mark to aim at, how to use the bow —
> Then draw it to the head, and let it go!"

There was a little constriction in Murray's own throat as he studied the brave words. He saw at a flash their deeper meaning. "Make myself fit to live my life," he thought "and then — whether it 's the life I want to live or not — let it go! Jane, you know how to fit the arrow to my hand — bless you! I *will* draw it to the head — *and let it go!*"

CHAPTER IX

SNAP SHOTS

"A LETTER from Montana for Miss Jane Bell," observed Peter, distributing the mail at the breakfast-table one May morning, nine months after the picnic at Grandfather Bell's farm. "It strikes me these Montana letters are beginning to arrive with astonishing regularity."

"They began," declared Ross, enjoying the sight of the sudden colour in Jane's face, as she tucked the letter into her belt and tried vainly to look unconscious as she went on serving the family from a big dish of oatmeal porridge, "by coming modestly once in about three or four weeks. Then they got to once a fortnight — that was in midwinter. Along about April ——"

"If I were a big, grown man," murmured Jane, "I 'd never condescend to keep track of ——"

"Along in April," pursued Ross, unmoved, "once in ten days was the schedule. But this last, coming as it does just one short week after

its predecessor, and carrying, as it does, two large red postage-stamps — which, I am confident, is underpayment ——"

"Stop teasing!" cried Nancy, always loyal to her sister. "Every one of you is envying Jane, wishing you could have letters from a real cowboy."

"A real cowboy!" laughed Ross. "I think I see Murray Townsend getting himself up in that rig. With his pale face and thin shoulders he 'd look like the tenderest kind of a tenderfoot."

Jane pulled the letter out of her belt. The previous letter had promised that this one should bring some snap-shot pictures of the writer and his surroundings. She hoped, as she broke the seal, that she should find them, feeling sure that the extra thick letter indicated that it carried the promised enclosures.

As she pulled out the sheets a little packet of blue-prints dropped into her lap. She picked them up and fell to looking at them. Peter, sitting next to her, laughed to himself, as he reached for his dish of oatmeal, Jane having forgotten to serve him. But everybody forgot breakfast, as the blue-prints went round the table. All but one were scenes of ranch and camp life, bringing into view horses and cowboys of all sorts and conditions, each carefully labelled with its

descriptive title. But the one at the bottom of the pack was called "the tenderfoot"—the only one of the set in which Jane's correspondent was in evidence.

"Can it be possible this is Murray?" exclaimed Mrs. Bell, studying incredulously the erect figure on horseback, life and energy in every outline, from the tilt of the wide hat to the set of the leg in the saddle. "Why, he looks as if he weighed thirty pounds more than when he went away."

"By George, the fellow has n't roughed it nearly a year for nothing, has he?" admitted Ross. "He does n't look the stage cowboy, either — I 'll say that for him. Those clothes have seen wear and rain, and that hat has had the true Western shape knocked into it. It makes you envy him, does n't it?"

Peter said nothing, but his eyes dwelt upon the figure in the saddle with a look of longing so intense that if anyone had been observing him it must have told his story plainly. One person *was* observing him, and as Peter looked up at last, with an involuntary glance at his father, who had just made some observation on the advantage it had been to the rich man's son to get out among the ranchmen and gain a new view of life, he met his father's eyes. Joseph Bell understood just what it meant to Peter to stay at home

and work as foreman in a note-paper factory when there were such places as Montana in the world waiting for young men to come and explore them. And there was that in his father's look which told Peter that his sacrifice was appreciated.

Up in her own room, when a dozen duties had been done, Jane read her letter. It was to her a deeply interesting letter, as had been all those which came before it, for Murray wielded a graphic pen, and his pictures of the sort of life he had been living were vivid as colour-sketches. He was rejoicing in the coming of spring and summer, after the long, cold winter, and his delight seemed to Jane so unlike any pleasure in outdoor life she had seen him show at home that it filled her with joy. The letter said, as it neared the close and fell into the personal vein, as letters do:

I never knew before what it was to breathe way down to the bottom of my lungs. My existence — after my accident, and up to the time I came here — seems now to me like that of some pale monk in his cell, feeding on other men's thoughts, but never living them himself. I 've learned to live! You, who have long known that secret, will be glad with me, won't you?

All through the winter I was wrapped to the eyes whenever I put my head out of the cabin door. Men dress warmly here in the winter — flannel-lined canvas overcoats — "blanket coats" they call them — felt boots, and all that. But they

don't make grannies of themselves as I did — at first. As the winter advanced, though, I began to get hardened to it, and before spring I could stand a pretty low temperature without feeling my blood congeal. But when spring came — spring in this Western country! I wish I could describe it. The air like wine, the sunshine like — nothing I can think of. When spring came I began to expand mentally and physically — and in still another way, I think. Anyhow, I 'm not the same fellow who went to the doctor for an outfit of drugs before he dared start West.

I 've learned a lot from these men I 've been associated with. A rough set they would seem to you, most of them — they did to me at first. But when I got to know them, underneath the roughness I found — men. It 's no use trying to put it into a letter. I must talk with you, face to face — and just what that means to me when I think of it I won't venture to say. I 'll be home in the fall, and then — I 'm going into my father's business. I have n't said that before, have I? You 'll please not mention it to anyone, except Peter, if you like; I want to surprise father. That 's going to be my reward for doing my duty. It is my duty — I see it plainly at last, and every ounce of determination I can grow from now till fall is going to be just so much more to offer him. But I won't brag about that. Do the best I can, it won't be a wonderful gift, for I 'm afraid my talents don't lie in that direction. But if honest effort can make up — Jane, I have n't watched some of these heroic chaps for nothing. I 'm simply shamed into taking my medicine, and shutting my mouth tight after it. And that 's the last word about it 's being medicine. I 'm going to get interested in the business if pitching in all over will do it.

This is a long letter, and I 'm done — except to tell you that the West does n't deserve all the credit for my altered views of life. A certain girl I know, who wanted to go to college, but gave up all thought of it because, besides the

family, her father and brothers had half a dozen helpless elderly relatives to support, is n't the poorest sort of inspiration to her friend, when he happens to be a fellow who never gave up anything for anybody in his life. He values her friendship far more than he dares to tell her now. Somebody — Ruskin? — said a knight's armour never fitted him quite so well as when the lady's hand had braced it — and I 'm beginning to understand what that rather picturesque metaphor may mean. Do I sound sentimental, and are you laughing at me? Don't do it! I 've not a "gun" in my belt, but I'm rather a rough looking customer nevertheless. I came in an hour ago, wet to the skin — caught out in a cloudburst without my slicker — and while my clothes dry am attired in my cousin's (seven sizes too big!) being averse to putting on any of the clothes in my trunk, the foolish clothes of civilisation.

I weigh one hundred and sixty-five. What do you think of that? And it 's not flesh, but worked-on muscle and sinew. Did I say I was done? I am. But I am also

Faithfully your friend,

MURRAY TOWNSEND.

"You look it," agreed Jane, studying the photograph. "You certainly look it." She gave the little print one more careful examination, noting the steady gaze the pictured face gave back, a spirited expression very different from the half-moody look she had first known; then she put the photographs away and went about her work. And as she went, a little song sang itself over and over in her heart — the song of trust in a ripening friendship of the sort that makes life worth living.

Spring and summer passed slowly by, marking a

growing interchange of amenities between the little house in Gay Street and the big one in Worthington Square. Things had happened during the winter, things kept on happening as the year advanced, to draw the two families together. In January Shirley had had a long and severe illness, during which Mrs. Bell and Jane made their way into the inmost heart of every member of the household. There were nights during that illness when Joseph Bell, feeling that difference of social position counted for nothing when a father was in trouble, went over to shake Harrison Townsend's hand, bidding him be of courage — and found himself detained as a friend in need.

By and by, when the anxiety was over and the Bells ceased coming often in and out, the Townsends began to summon them. Mr. Townsend discovered the shrewd wisdom and genial philosophy of Joseph Bell to be of value, and often went to sit with him in the little front room, where his eyes noted with approval the rows of books. He discovered that Armstrongs's head man knew more that lay between the covers of those books than did Harrison Townsend himself.

As for Mrs. Townsend and Mrs. Bell, while they were too different in temperament and taste to get far into each other's lives, they found enough in common to bring them together rather

oftener than could naturally have been expected. There was a quiet poise about Mrs. Bell which the other woman, accomplished woman of the world though she was, could only study in despair of ever being able to attain. But she found a rest and refreshment in her neighbour's society which none of her more fashionable friends could give her, and she sent often for Mrs. Bell to keep her company.

"Olive's taken one big step in advance," Peter said to his mother, one day in early summer. "She has begun to write regularly to Forrest."

"I 'm very glad," said Mrs. Bell. "Does he answer her letters?"

"He does — only too glad to, I should say. She's shown me some of his letters. There 's a homesick grunt to them, that 's sure. Life in the army, and particularly life in the Philippines, is n't unmitigated bliss, and he's finding it out. He does n't exactly squeal, but you can see how it is with him."

"It will do Olive good to take up such a sisterly duty. Was it your suggestion?" asked Mrs. Bell.

"How did you guess that? I did give her a talk one day, when she happened to say that Shirley was the only one of the family who wrote to Forrest with any regularity. She was pretty angry

with me for a day or two, but she came round, and now she writes once a fortnight. There 's really more to that girl than you would think."

"She is improving very much, I am sure," agreed his mother, warmly. "With a different early training, Olive would have been by now a much more lovable girl than she has seemed. But, happily, it 's not too late to give her new ideals, and I think you have helped in that direction."

"Ideals?" mused Peter. "I don't think I have any of those — at least, I don't call them by that name. Rules of the game — how will that do, instead? The foreman of Room 8 in a note-paper factory is n't supposed to have ideals, is he?"

"I don't know about that. Suppose you ask the men and women under you. I fancy they would protest your ideals were pretty hard for them to live up to?"

Peter laughed to himself. "Maybe they would. But they would n't put it that way. 'The boss is a tough one to suit,' they 'd say"

"Call it what you will — rules of the game, if you like. But, as the children used to say, 'Peter Bell plays fair!' "

"I hope he does. If he does n't, it is n't the fault of his trainer." And the gray eyes met

the brown ones for an instant in a glance which said many things Peter could not have spoken.

The days went on; June gave place to July; August heat melted into September mildness; and October, with its falling leaves, marked the end of the days of outdoor life lived from April to November in the little garden.

"The twenty-fifth is Jane's birthday," observed Nancy to Shirley, several days before that event. "We 're wondering what to do in celebration."

"Why, it's mine, too!" cried Shirley. "How funny that we did n't know it! We ought to celebrate it together."

This remark was duly reported to Mrs. Bell, who said at once that they must invite Shirley over to have her birthday cake with Jane's. But before this plan could be carried into effect, an invitation arrived from the big house, asking every member of the Bell household to be present at a small dinner of Shirley's own planning.

"This is the first time we 've all been asked over there together — it 's quite an occasion," declared Peter, on the evening of the twenty-fifth, as he stood waiting in the doorway for everybody to be ready. "I say," he exclaimed, "but we 're gorgeous!"

And he fastened admiring eyes on his mother, who was dressed in a pale gray gown of her own

making, and therefore of faultless effect. The quality was fine also, for Peter had looked after that.

"Gorgeous does n't seem exactly the word," Ross commented. "Demure but coquettish, I should call that gown."

The party proceeded in a body to the corner of Worthington Square, where Jane, under escort of Peter, came to a sudden halt. "Oh, I 've forgotten something to go with my present to Shirley," she said to him. "Give me the key, please. I 'll run back and get it. Don't wait. I want to slip into the dining-room over there, anyway, before I see anybody, and I 'll come in by the side door."

So Jane ran back alone, and let herself into the dark house, the lamps having, for safety, been all extinguished before the family went out. She hurriedly lighted the lamp in the front room, for she meant to fill out a card with a certain appropriate quotation, to put with Shirley's gift, and the book she needed was in this room.

The quotation was not as easily found as she had thought it would be, and hurriedly searching for it, Jane consumed considerable time, but did not want to give it up, for the words fitted Shirley delightfully, and would give point to the gift.

So bending over the book, still unsuccessful, she heard with regret the sound of a quick step upon the porch, followed by a ring at the bell. She sprang up, book in hand, wishing she had taken her affairs, with her light, into the dining-room. Hoping that her appearance, in her evening frock, would warn the chance visitor that the time was inopportune, she opened the door.

"Jane!" exclaimed a joyful voice. "Ah, but this is good luck!" And Jane looked up into a face so brown and rugged and strong that for an instant she did not know it. But the eyes gazing eagerly into her own told her in the next breath who stood before her. She put out both hands, speechless with surprise. They were grasped and held, as Murray Townsend closed the door behind him with a sturdy shoulder.

"I — you — why, I thought you were n't coming for a month yet," she said, half shyly, for in spite of the smile and the warm handclasp, it seemed as if this must be a stranger who stood before her, radiating health and happiness, and looking so different from the pale young man who had gone away a year before.

"I was hit by a sudden wave of homesickness that swept me off my feet," Murray explained, releasing the hands which were gently drawing themselves away, but continuing to stare down at the engaging

young figure in its modest evening attire, as if he had seen nothing so attractive in all Montana, in spite of his fine tales of its glories. "I began to think about it, and that was fatal. Once the notion of coming home a bit ahead of the date I 'd set took hold of me, I was no more use to anybody. They told me to pack up and start, for I was n't fit to brand a calf, and could n't earn my salt." He laughed. "Tell me you 're not sorry."

"Indeed, I 'm not. This happens to be my birthday, and it 's the nicest surprise I 've had yet."

"Thank you — that's the welcome I wanted. But"—he glanced at her dress again, and his face fell —"you were going out?"

"Only to Worthington Square," laughed Jane. "It 's Shirley's birthday, too, and we 're all to be there at dinner. Why, you must know! You 've just come from there."

"That *is* a joke on me. I rang — no latch-key, you know — and a new maid I 've never seen let me in. I saw everything lighted up and flowers all about, and asked if they were entertaining. She said they were, and everybody was dressing. So I just turned and ran, thinking I 'd slip over here and see you first, since I could n't see much of my family till the affair was over.

Well, well — so I may spend the evening in your company. Talk about luck!"

They stood there, exchanging questions and replies in the laughing, disconnected way in which people are wont to address each other in the first excitement of an unexpected and welcome meeting, neither of them knowing quite what they were saying, but each feeling that something of great importance had happened. Then Jane gathered up her wraps and Shirley's gift, and said, with a startled glance at the clock, "It is later than I thought! We must go this minute."

"Shall I put out the light?" and Murray strode across the floor. Jane noted with gladness that his walk was the walk of a strong man.

They crossed the street to the hedge gate, and came to the side entrance. As he put his thumb to the bell, Murray said, half under his breath, "I 've imagined all sorts of home-comings, but never one quite so nice as this. To make my entrance with you ——"

"Oh, you 're not going to make it with me!" said Jane, gaily. "I shall stay in the dining-room, arranging Shirley's plate, until you are safe in the midst of them."

And plead as he would, Murray found there was no way to make her change this decision. So, at last, hearing the voices of the others

in the big hall, where they were gathered about the fireplace, in which roared a royal October fire, he went to the door and opened it a crack. From this position, he looked back at Jane, where she stood by Shirley's chair watching him across the gala decorations of roses which crowned the handsome table.

"I 'm at home again!" he called to her softly, and she nodded, smiling.

Then, hat in hand, he threw the door wide and marched through, shoulders back, head up, eyes intent upon the faces which, at the opening of the door, had turned that way.

CHAPTER X

HIDE AND SEEK

THERE was a moment's astonished hush as the group about the fire stared at the erect young figure. Then Murray's father was the first across the floor to meet him; and in an instant more the whole family was upon him, while the Bells rose, smiling, to do him honour.

"My dear boy!" There was a great gladness in Harrison Townsend's voice and he wrung his son's hand as if he would wring it off. Murray's mother, too — he had not known she was capable of so much tenderness, and he kissed her with a feeling that in his thoughts he had n't done her love for him justice.

As for Olive and Shirley, there was nothing lacking in the way they showed their joy in having him at home again. Murray himself, during this long year of absence, was not the only one who had learned a few enlightening truths about the great business of living.

To the full, also, Murray enjoyed the surprising fact that the Bells were grouped about the fire

in a way which indicated that they were entirely at home. He rejoiced in the heartiness with which the male members of that family gripped his hand — they seemed like brothers. And when the sweet-faced, bright-eyed lady in gray pressed his hand in both her own and looked at him as if her pleasure in his return was very great, Murray, quite unable to help it, stooped and kissed her also. Surely, home-coming was a happier thing than he had dared to picture it.

He was off upstairs to his room presently, while word was sent to an exasperated cook to delay the dinner yet a little longer. In less time than could have been expected, however, Murray was down again, and in his evening clothes showed even more plainly than before the astonishing increase in his weight.

"These shoulders," cried Peter, inspecting them, "can they be the shoulders of the delicate young gentleman who went away last year looking so long and lean and lank? I wonder you could get them into your coat."

"I could n't," Murray answered, laughing "I had to borrow father's dinner-jacket and one of his waistcoats."

"It was fortunate for you that the old coat was n't given away when the new one came home,"

his father observed, regarding the shoulders in evidence with great satisfaction.

They went out to dinner in the gayest spirits, and if everybody remembered with regret the one absent, everybody still rejoiced that this promising son of the house was once more at its board. For there could be no question that the eldest son looked now a fit representative of the family of Townsend.

The dinner which followed was an elaborate one, for it was not within the range of the hostess's notions to entertain in any simple fashion, even when the occasion was the birthday of a fourteen-year-old. But the young people at the board succeeded in infusing so much of their own joyousness into the affair that the time passed swiftly. There were birthday gifts at Jane's plate as well as at Shirley's, and it would have been hard to tell, at the close of the feast, which pair of cheeks was the pinker, or which pair of eyes the brighter. It is safe to guess however, that there were elements in the pleasure of one recipient which must have been lacking in that of the other, and that the presence of one birthday guest counted for more to her than all the gifts put together. The fact that she could hardly look up without encountering the interested glance of the newly arrived traveller was just a

trifle disconcerting, and it must be admitted that when Jane and Shirley gathered up their gifts at the close of the dinner, the little girl knew better than the older one just what she had received.

Dinner over, a short and not especially dramatic little scene took place behind closed library doors. Scenes which mean the most are often quietest of all.

"I just wanted to tell you, sir," said Murray to his father, "something I thought you might like to know right away. I — went West to make myself strong enough to — to go into the business, if you care to have me. I mean," he went on quickly, as his father looked at him as if he could not quite believe the purport of these words, "I mean in whatever capacity you can use me. Shipping-clerk, if you think I 'd better begin at the bottom" — and his smile was not a smile which supplied "but of course you won't."

Mr. Townsend stood looking at Murray, studying the straightforward gaze which met his; noting the tints of health, the signs of vigour in the fine face. "Murray, do you mean it?" he asked.

"I do, sir."

"And yet you don't like the prospect of a business life any more than you ever did, do you?"

'Not much, sir."

"You make this offer knowing fully what it entails? I have little expectation that your brother will ever agree to my wishes."

"That's what decided me."

"You are willing to give up your books? You could complete your college course now, with your renewed health."

If Murray winced at this he did not let it show.

"I think you need me now, sir. And as for the college course — and the books — I shall have my evenings."

Mr. Townsend studied his son's face a full minute in silence. Then he held out his hand. Murray seized it with a grasp which banished the elder man's doubts and showed him that his boy's heart was in this offer of himself. The two shook hands without speaking. There seemed no need of further words just then.

It being Shirley's birthday, that young person's wishes ruled the hour. Prompted by Rufus, who thirsted for something lively, she decreed a game of hide-and-seek over the whole house, and succeeded in enticing the elder people into the frolic. Mr. Townsend and Murray, coming from the library, found things in full swing.

Mr. Bell was just emerging from a small closet under the staircase, his hair much rum-

pled. Mrs. Bell, laughing blithely, had run round a corner of the reception-room and touched "goal" before her son Rufus could swing himself down the stairs and get in ahead of her. Mrs. Townsend — and her husband could not quite credit his eyes as he saw her — was, with trailing skirts held close, squeezing out of a very small corner behind the grand piano in the drawing room.

"Well, well!" cried the newcomers, enthusiastically. "Let us into the game."

"Come on!" shouted Rufus. "Father 's 'it'! Let's play it in another way, and hide for keeps. Everybody stay hid till found, and each man found join the hunt. Makes it nice and exciting for the last fellow."

"You 'll have to tell us our bounds pretty carefully," said Mr. Bell, smiling at his hostess. "In our excitement we may open the wrong doors."

"Open any door," responded Mrs. Townsend promptly, feeling more like a girl again than she had felt in many years of formal entertaining, and preparing, as she spoke, to hurry up the staircase to a retreat that she felt would be secure.

It proved great fun, and a full half-hour went by before the last one was found. Murray had been the first to be discovered, his head so full

of the late talk in the library that he had somewhat dazedly secreted himself in a position easily come upon by Mr. Bell. So when the second round began, it was Murray who stood counting the tale of numbers in the hall below, while his quarry scurried away over the house.

"He knows every nook and corner of it, of course," whispered Ross to Jane, as they ran lightly up the second flight of stairs, "so we 'll have to hide pretty close to escape him. I 'm for a closet I know of where there's a pile of blankets as big as a barn. Will you come?"

"No — I know a better place," and Jane slipped away by herself. She meant to be the last found, and to elude Murray as long as she could, a very girlish feeling having taken possession of her that the time to run away is the time when you see somebody looking uncommonly as if he would like to be with you. Although she longed to hear the outcome of the conference in the library, she was somehow just a little afraid of the new Murray, and it was with a delightful sense of exhilaration that she made her quick and quiet way up a third flight of stairs to one of Shirley's haunts in an unused portion of the regions under the eaves.

It was a long time before she heard the sounds of the hunt, in which at last the whole party

had come to join, approaching her hiding place. But suddenly a lower door was thrown open, and Murray's voice sounded far down in a determined challenge:

"We 'll have you now, Jane — it 's no use. Shirley 's kept us away so far — the rascal — but your time 's up!"

She *could not* be caught! There was a tiny door low down in the side of the closet where she was hiding, and dark though she knew it must be in the unknown region beyond this door, she opened it, slipped through, closed it, and crept along the bare beams beyond.

Murray was carrying a little electric searchlight, which he was flashing into every nook and crevice. Its sharp beam had penetrated the hole in the blankets Ross had kept for a breathing space. It had likewise sought out the hems of skirts, the soles of shoes, fingers clutching concealing draperies, and elbows sticking unwarily out from sly nooks. Jane saw its rays outline the edges of the small door beyond which she crouched; then she heard Murray's triumphant cry, "O-ho, she's dropped her handkerchief! Now we 're hot on the trail. She's gone through this door, the crafty lady!"

There was a shout of mingled laughter and expostulation. "She would n't go through that

rat-hole! It 's too dark in there for a girl. There 's no floor, either."

But Murray was attempting to open the door. It was a sliding door, not a hinged one, and for a moment it delayed him, for he was not familiar with these regions, so dear to Shirley.

During that moment, Jane, with the breathless unreadiness to be discovered which takes hold of the hiding one, even in a game, had desperately retreated over the rafters, in the hope of coming upon some sheltering corner. The next instant, with a smothered cry, she had fallen over the edge of something, *splash* into three feet of water!

Nobody had heard her, and somehow, in the intensity of the game, Jane's second emotion, after the startling sensation of her sudden immersion, was one of absurd relief at finding herself, after all, safe from discovery. For, as the little door at last flew open, and Murray's brilliant light leaped into the space under the eaves, it disclosed to Jane that she had dropped into a cistern, the top of which lay level with the floor beams, and at the bottom thereof, where, having scrambled to her feet, she stood stooping, was out of sight of the faces peering in at the small door.

"Not here," was Murray's disappointed observation, after one wave of his light round the

small space, "unless she's in mother's special rain-water tank, white frock and all. Come on. I thought we had her then, sure. Where can she be? She's been here — witness that handkerchief. And if there's a cranny we have n't explored, I 'll ——"

The little door closed with a slam; the light faded away from its edges. The voices of the party were heard retreating down the stairs, and Jane was left alone to realise the humour of the situation.

It was undoubtedly humorous. It could hardly be dangerous, for October had been a mild month, and Jane was well used to cold plunges. The wetting of the pretty frock was of no consequence, for it was quite washable. It was fairly easy to scramble back to the rafters — Jane had done that the moment the searching party was out of hearing, and was carefully wringing out her drenched skirts. Her impromptu bath had wet her to the shoulders, besides bruising her arm rather badly. But the trying thing was to get downstairs and away without being discovered — and the whole company in full cry over the house!

Jane laughed rather hysterically, shivering a little, more from excitement and chagrin than from chill. She crept carefully to the small

door, meaning to push it open and listen, when suddenly it began to slide quietly aside of itself. The next instant she saw a sunburned hand upon its fastening, and heard a cool voice, close by, say quietly:

"It's all right. Nobody knows but me. They've given it up, and sat down to await your own sweet will in showing up. Here 's a big steamer rug. Will you have it to wrap up in? I 'll get you home without a soul knowing, and we 'll play it off as a joke, somehow."

"Thank you," answered Jane, in a very meek voice, which shook with mingled irritation and merriment, as the rug came through the opening. "Perhaps I could put it on better if I were not balancing myself on these rafters."

"I beg your pardon. I 'll get out of this closet, and you can get in. I just thought you would n't leave so — so damp a trail behind you if you were wrapped up in something. Here are a — er — a pair of Olive's rubbers for your feet, so you won't show any tracks."

Murray's voice was shaking also, and in a minute more the two were laughing together. Jane, shrouded in her rug, emerged from the closet into the attic, and Murray regarded her by the light of his electric searcher.

"You don't look much the worse for having

taken such desperate measures to escape me," he remarked, noting with keen enjoyment the rich colour on the cheek near which he was rather mercilessly holding his torch. "Rather meet a cold ducking than a warm friend any time, wouldn't you?"

"Not at all. I — you know how one hates to be caught."

"Does one? Now I can't conceive jumping into a tank of water to escape you, if you had been after me!"

"Please stop laughing at me and help me to get home."

"I 'm not laughing at you. I 'm — I may pretend to be laughing, but inside, I assure you, I 'm tremendously worried lest this running away indicates a state of mind —"

"Please take me home!"

"Come, then." He led the way, by back staircases, to a quiet side entrance, and so quickly across the street, and into her own house. Then he went back to the others, to evade their questioning so cleverly that nobody but Jane's mother suspected that anything out of the ordinary had happened. In a very short time indeed Jane drifted inconspicuously in upon the company again, and when inquiries from the younger members of the party as to the change in her

costume fell thick and fast upon her, Murray protected her with the nonchalant explanation:

"Don't bother her. She's very kindly trying to shield me for being the cause of a little accident that happened to the other dress. It was confoundedly awkward of me, but she cheers me by declaring that she can easily repair damages!"

It was Murray who took Jane home again by and by, and who lingered on the porch, after the others had gone in, to tell her how his father had received the good news.

"I 'm so glad!" Jane's hands were clasped tight together. "I knew it would be just as you tell me. Are n't you wonderfully happy?"

"Wonderfully. Happier than ever in my life — except for just one thing."

"Nothing serious?"

"Well — I certainly hope not. What bothers me is that — you seem, somehow — not exactly afraid of me, but — different. I don't know how to express it — but I ——" He stopped, his tone growing anxious. "You know, I could n't bear that," he added. "Unless I thought it meant —— See here, Jane — are we just as good friends as ever?"

"Why, of course we are!" She said it shyly. She was very glad it was so dark on the little porch.

"Friends for always?"

"I don't change, I think," she answered, with a proud little lift of the head.

"Don't you? Well, as I don't either, that ought to satisfy me. Yet it does n't quite, after all. It's odd, but I believe just being good friends who don't change is n't enough. Oh, don't go! You 're not angry? Yes, I know it 's late, but I 've hardly seen you yet. You will go? - But you 'll let me come over early to-morrow — after more than a year away? Well, then, to-morrow I 'll have to teach you not to be afraid of me. On my honour I 'm not carrying a 'gun!' Wait a minute — just a minute! . . . *How did I ever stay away from you so long?* . . . — Good night, little Jane — good night!"

CHAPTER XI

IN THE GARDEN

WINTER — long and cold; spring — late and slow; then, all at once, in June, radiant summer and the little garden round the corner in Gay Street was a place of richly bursting bloom — a riot of colours against the leafy green background of its vine-hung walls.

Toward the end of June a week of almost tropical heat had made the evenings outdoors, on the little porch, and in the garden itself, events to be looked forward to throughout the day. Joseph Bell, Peter, Ross, and Rufus, thought of them many times during the hottest day of all — midsummer, the twenty-first of the month — and came home at night to find the table laid for a cool-looking supper out under the shadow of the maple, and Mrs. Bell, Jane, and Nancy, in thin summer frocks, putting the finishing touches to the attractive meal about to be served there.

Up in a window of the house next door, behind closed blinds, an elderly neighbour had

watched Jane wreathing a big glass bowl full of strawberries with a crisp little green vine spray.

"The Bells certainly are the queerest people anybody ever lived neighbour to," she said over her shoulder to her sister, a withered little spinster, who, in this hot, small upstairs room, was sewing at another window, which did not look out upon the garden, and therefore could have its blinds open. "Anybody 'd think life was just one picnic to them. Think of lugging all those dishes outdoors this hot night, and then lugging 'em all in again — and they all dressed out in flowered muslins!"

The sister came to the window and peered somewhat wistfully out through the closed blinds. "It does look sort of pleasant out there," she said. "And we certainly can't say they 're not good neighbours. Mrs. Bell sent over a whole tin of those light rolls of hers this morning. They 'll come in handy for supper."

"There come the men." Mrs. Hunter brought her gaze to bear upon the four who had stolen up to the gate, and who, as she spoke, burst out suddenly with a crisp clapping of hands which brought the three in the "flowered-muslins" to the right-about. If Mrs. Hunter and Miss Maria, watching those four advance, could have heard what they were saying as they caught

sight of the flower-decked table, they might have had a new light shed upon the question whether the trouble of bringing forth all those dishes from the house had been worth while

The neighbours saw the merry little meal eaten, and saw all hands clear it away at the end, making short work of the many dishes. But afterward twilight fell, and little could be discerned except the gleam of the light dresses and the presence near of dark forms lying on the grass.

It was after the midsummer moon was lighting the garden into a small fairy-land that Peter, springing up, exclaimed, "There's Olive and Murray!" and ran to greet them.

There was a third person with them, and a moment later the others heard Peter exclaim, in a tone of surprise:

"Well, well, well! You don't mean to say this is —— Why, how are you? How are you? I 'm tremendously glad to see you!"

"Thank you! I 'm a good deal gladder to be home than anybody possibly can be to have me." And Jane, recognising first the peculiar quality of the voice, cried out:

"Why, it 's Forrest!" and led the others, as a general uprising took place.

"Yes, it's Forrest," said the voice, and in the bright moonlight Jane looked up into the

face whose outlines in these two years of absence had grown dim in her memory. It was the same face, but she thought it looked older and thinner, and she realised then and there that Forrest was not the same careless boy who had gone so lightly away to lead a soldier's life.

When the greetings were over and the company had settled down again on the turf under the maple, Jane found Forrest next to herself, and had her first little insight into his thoughts.

"I feel like a stranger from a foreign country, I assure you," he was saying to her, presently, as the talk and laughter of the others made a bit of confidence possible. "And the strangest thing of all to me is the sight of my brother grinding away down there in the office, looking like the healthiest fellow in town. I can't understand it; it took me off my feet!"

"We have grown so used to the change," said Jane, smiling to herself, in the dim light, "that we don't think about it any more."

"You see," Forrest pursued, "I came home on the quiet — just wanting to see, you know, how they would take it. I thought if they really still cared, I should know it by the look on their faces ——"

"Oh, how could you think ——" Jane began, eagerly.

But he interrupted. "A fellow thinks a good many things when he's on the other side of the world, and I — well, I got to wanting to know some things so badly, I was n't sorry when I had my fever. Yes — you did n't know that, did you? Oh, I had it all right! And I was n't sorry when they sent me home with a lot of other convalescents. So I made for the office the minute I had seen my mother and the girls, for they told me that Murray was down there for good — a thing I had n't known. Maybe they thought I 'd be jealous — and maybe I was — in a way, though I don't want the job any more than I ever did.

"Father gave me a good warm greeting — I 'll say that. And Murray — well, when he got up and came toward me with his hand out, looking like the strongest kind of a young business man, I felt as if — But I can't tell you about that now."

There was a general movement of the younger people of the party, in response to a request from Ross, who was entertaining them with some new tricks, at which he was an adept. During the confusion Murray came and flung himself upon the grass beside Jane.

"Take me into the conference, will you?" he said. "I 'm envious of anybody my brother talks to, I 'm so glad to get him back."

Under cover of the subdued light, Jane found her hand, which had been resting on the cool grass where she sat, taken into a warm, significant grasp, as familiar now as it was dear. She gave back a little answering pressure, without turning her head toward Murray, at whose close presence she had grown instantly happier.

"Take you in?" Forrest answered slowly. "Well, if you — and all the others — will only take me in, and never turn me out — or let me turn myself out again — I 'll be — satisfied."

With one hand holding tight the small one buried in the grass, Murray's other hand went out toward the fist clenched on Forrest's knee. "Old fellow," he said, warmly, "if you 'll just stay where you can get over often into this garden in Gay Street, you 'll find it will do as much toward making life worth living as it has done for every other one of the Townsend family."

"I believe you," answered Forrest, and gave the brotherly hand an answering grip.

BOOK II

WORTHINGTON SQUARE

CHAPTER I

JANE WEARS PEARLS

A TAP upon her door sent Mrs. Murray Townsend flying across the room to answer it. She expected to find her husband there, awaiting her permission to come in and see her in the cloud-like white gown which she had worn but once before — two months ago. He had vowed since that he had never seen that wedding-gown, being occupied wholly upon the occasion on which it was worn in keeping his head, in order to play his own part with dignity and self-command.

But to Jane's disappointment, she opened the door only to a maid with a florist's box. The box, upon being examined, yielded up among a mass of roses Murray's card, which bore this message:

Sorry to be delayed, dear, but father wanted to go over everything that has happened at the office during my absence. Will be up in time for the pow-wow. Wear one of these for

MURRAY.

Jane smiled regretfully. It had seemed a long

day. Only that morning she and Murray had returned, belated, from their wedding journey across the continent, to find cards out for a reception in their honour to take place that very evening.

"You knew the date," Mrs. Harrison Townsend had said to her elder son, when, upon being told that his delay had caused much anxiety to the givers of the affair, he turned to his bride with a soft whistle of recollection and chagrin.

"I certainly did," he had owned. "I forgot, I 'm afraid, that there were such things as after-wedding festivities due to society, and that this was the date for the first of the series. I don't think Jane even knew."

"I didn't," said Jane, looking regretfully at her mother-in-law's handsome face, which betrayed a slight annoyance. It certainly had been trying to receive daily telegrams from the travellers throughout the past week, announcing delays at this place and that on the homeward way.

"Of course it 's of no consequence now that you are safely here. I 'm only sorry Jane will have no chance to rest and visit. The florist's men will arrive within an hour, and the house will be generally upset."

"I 'll run away over to Gay Street, then," said Jane. "Murray 's going down to the office, and mother and Nan will be looking for me."

"My dear, I 'm sorry, but Olive has asked a few friends informally for luncheon, people from out of town who are coming for to-night. It would hardly do for you not to meet them — since two are cousins."

So Jane had had to be content with one brief hour in the little home round the corner in Gay Street, and then she had come back to the big house in Worthington Square, there to begin to act the part expected of her. Murray had been more than sorry to leave her on this first day, but his father's affairs were pressing, the office work had suffered in his absence, and he felt it a necessity to get back into the harness without an hour's delay. He had expected to be early at home, but his message showed Jane that even for her he did not mean to cut short the work of taking up again the routine of business at the point where he had left it two months ago.

Selecting half a dozen of the finest of her roses, Jane, with a long, light coat slipped on over her finery, opened the door and peeped cautiously out into the large, square gallery of the upper hall. Nobody was in sight. The doors of Mrs. Townsend's and Olive's rooms were closed, the ladies dressing for the affair of the evening. The door of a guest-room, occupied by the two cousins from out of town, was slightly ajar, and

a maid was to be seen inside, offering a cup of tea on a tray. One of the cousins had a headache, and was fortifying herself for a fatiguing evening.

Jane slipped quietly by this door and round the gallery to the point where a staircase led to the lower landing, a place just now embowered in palms, which were to serve as a screen for the string orchestra. She paused an instant on this landing, to look down upon the brilliant picture presented by the entrance-hall and its opening rooms below. The look of it reminded her of an evening long ago, the first upon which she had set foot as a guest in the great unknown house in Worthington Square, when Murray had taken charge of her and brought her up here on the landing, to look down upon the scene in which neither of them had much cared to take part.

"Can this really be my home?" thought Jane, feeling as if it could not all be true, even yet. She ran quickly on downstairs and round the foot of the staircase to a door beneath, which furnished an inconspicuous exit from the big hall, and which opened upon a short passage and a side entrance not much used by the family. This had long been a favourite entrance for Murray himself, for it shortened the way to Gay Street.

A very short cut Jane made of it, for a flood of light from the long row of windows in the

dining-room fell across the path, and turned it into one less obscure than she wished it to be just now. Holding her delicate skirts well away from the dust of the road, she hurried across, through the warm air of the May evening.

There was nobody to be seen downstairs in the old house, although lamps were lighted and the small rooms wore their usual air of homelikeness and order. Jane ran up the steep little staircase which led to the sleeping-rooms above. She understood that, as at the big house, the family were engaged in arraying themselves for the Townsend reception. She paused at the top of the stairs to listen and observe, for the various doors were all more or less ajar, and the usual atmosphere of friendly family comradeship gave her a little pang of homesickness.

The first thing distinguishable was the fact that Peter seemed to be having a bad time with his neck-gear, and that his cousin, Ross McAndrew, was enjoying his perturbation of mind.

"Either my neck is bigger than it was, or this neckband has shrunk." Peter's growl rolled out into the tiny hall, and brought a dimple into Jane's cheek as she listened.

"Probably both catastrophes have happened." This was Ross's voice in reply. "Anybody who has seen you stow away buckwheat cakes

and maple-syrup all winter could n't be surprised if your neck should take a seventeen collar this spring."

"Seventeen nothing! Sixteen 's my size, and when I wear a bigger it 'll be because —— O jiminy, I 've burst that buttonhole! What on earth am I to do now? I don't own but one dress shirt that 'll fit the barn-door opening in my white waistcoat."

"Your mother 'll sew that up on your back. I 'll do it myself if you won't howl at a prick or two."

"Much obliged, but I know the general style of your repairs in a case like this. Nan 'll do it, if she's dressed," and Peter's door swung open. Intent on reaching his younger sister, whose door was next beyond his own, he did not observe the figure at the head of the stairs in the shadow. He proceeded to perform a double tattoo upon Nancy's door.

"What 's the matter, Petey?" sounded an amiable voice from within.

"Neckband of my shirt's a wreck. Want you to come and splice the main brace."

"All right — if you 'll button me up the back. I can't reach below the fourth button, and mother 's busy dressing, too. It's *so* inconvenient having Janey married."

"Give and take 's fair play," agreed Peter, as a charming young figure in pink-flowered muslin backed out of the door, both bare arms strenuously demonstrating that they could not reach below the fourth button. "Stand still now — no fidgeting. What on earth a girl wants her rigging fastened behind for is beyond me! If it must be, why not use buttons big enough to get hold of?"

"Look out, don't treat my buttonholes as you did your own, or I 'll have to be sewed up, too."

"All right — you 're done. Turn round and let's see how you look in front. Good work! You 're a stunner, and tremendously grown up, too, with your hair that way. Put it up the day you were eighteen, did n't you?"

"Of course," admitted Nancy, with her comely head held high. Then, as Jane's white skirts in the shadow caught her eye, "Why, there 's Janey! You dear! Oh, how good it looks to see you standing there!"

At the cry three doors flew wide open, and Mr. Bell, Ross, and Rufus appeared simultaneously upon their respective thresholds, while a voice from within called, "Is Jane there? Come here, dear!"

"O mother, let me do your hair, will you?" offered Jane, eagerly, when she had succeeded in

making her way past the embraces of her delighted family.

"Not in that dress, child! Mercy, remember it's your wedding-gown, and don't whisk round so! Sit down there and let me look at you while I put my hair up; it won't take but a minute, and then you shall help me into my dress."

"If you won't let me do your hair, I 'll go sew up Pete's buttonhole. I must do something for somebody. It seems so funny to have got dressed over in the big house. I just had to come over here and see the rest of you getting ready and consulting each other on details as usual. Where 's your work-basket, mother dear? Nan," — running to the door — "don't you *dare* to mend Peter's shirt! I want to do it myself."

"All right, Mrs. Townsend, nothing will suit me better," declared Peter, with satisfaction, kneeling in front of his sister with his back to her, while she sat on the edge of his splint-bottomed armchair and threaded her needle. "What does Murray think, by the way, of having his bride rush over here to assist her family, and leave him to shift for himself? Why are n't you putting in his studs and things, like a dutiful wife?"

"He could n't get home from the office till the last minute. Mr.— Father Townsend wanted to consult him on so much that 's happened

while we 've been gone. Of course I 'm going back before he comes," responded Jane. "Dear me — wreck is certainly the word for this buttonhole. Did you try to put your thumb through it?"

"Tried to climb through it myself bodily at the last. Anything better calculated to put a fellow into a lovely frame of mind for an affair where's he's expected to make himself agreeable I don't know. Wrestling to get an iron collar on a steel neckband is — well — it 's a trifle upsetting to the nerves. Be sure you get that buttonhole the right size. Better try the collar-button in it before you make fast."

"When you 're done with him you can tie my tie for me, if you 're looking for work," announced Rufus, appearing in the doorway. "I can't seem to get the right curve on the thing."

"Janey, would you wear this bracelet Shirley gave me last Christmas, or would n't you?" Nancy looked in over Rufus's shoulder. At eighteen she was tall for her years; at twenty-one Rufus, although sturdily built, had no advantage of her in inches. It was Peter, with his six feet of brawn, who was the family pride in the matter of size.

Jane snipped off her thread and turned to look at her younger sister. "Do as you like, Nan,

of course," said she, "but — if you want to look quite perfect in my eyes you 'll leave it off."

"Good for you!" Peter observed Nancy's simple frock and fair neck with approval. "Lots of time for the gewgaws when they 're needed to cover up the hollows."

"Now I 'll go help mother," said Jane, having adjusted Rufus's cravat to his satisfaction, mended a tiny rip in Ross's glove, and given her father a hug, since his dressing was completed, and there seemed to be nothing else she could do for him. He had held her fast, regardless of her bridal attire, for he had missed her sorely during her two months' absence, and the thought that, however often she might seek it, his roof was no longer hers, was one not easily assimilated.

"I should really not have felt properly dressed," averred Mrs. Bell, as Jane hovered about her, performing all sorts of small offices, "if you had not been here to assure me that I was quite right in all points."

As Jane smiled, first at her mother, then at her father, wondering how she had ever been able, even for Murray's sake, to leave two people so dear, a low call, apparently proceeding from downstairs, reached her ear, and she turned quickly to listen.

"Jane?" came the voice again, interrogatively. "Gentle Jane, you 're not lost to me for good and all?"

Jane ran to the head of the small stairway and looked down. In the light from a bracket lamp at the foot, her husband's face smiled up at her. A bright, strong face it was, ruddy with health, and alert with interest in that which he beheld at the top of the stairs. Murray was in evening dress, and as Jane observed the fact she cried softly and regretfully:

"Why, it must be later than I thought! I did n't mean to be away when you came — I 'm so sorry! It does n't seem as if I 'd been here five minutes."

"No excuses necessary, dear," he answered. "When I sent you word, I did n't expect to be able to get away till the last minute, but a telegram from a man who had an appointment with father let us out, and I followed my message home. I came after you because mother is getting a bit uneasy. She wants to be sure the bride is at her elbow, ready for the fray, though not a soul will show up, of course, till long after the hour on the cards."

"I 'll come this minute," and Jane caught up her long coat, threw a kiss at her family, and hurried down. "You 'll all come right away,

won't you?" she called back, and let Murray walk off with her.

At the curb she paused. "I meant to have borrowed Nan's rubbers," she said, looking down at her white-shod feet. "I forgot when I came over."

"That 's easy," and Murray had her across the street before she could protest that she was too heavy for him.

"You could n't have done that when I first knew you, could you?" laughed Jane, with pride in his strength of arm.

"Not much. What a slim and sickly whiffet I was! I wonder you ever looked twice at me, with Pete at hand as a contrast."

"I liked muscle, but I like brains too," explained Jane, as if this were the first time the matter had been made clear.

"Thank you. I 'm afraid I had none too many of those, either. The house looks festive, does n't it? Have you seen the dining-room? Mother seemed to be particularly pleased with the decorations there."

"I 'm afraid I ran away in too much of a hurry to notice."

Murray gave his young wife an amused look as they stood together on the steps of the small side entrance by which Jane had come out an hour before.

"Do you know where you are to stand in the receiving line?" he inquired.

Jane shook her head.

"Do you know whether you are to shake hands with the guests or merely bow?"

"No. You 'll tell me, won't you?"

"Do you know whether I 'm to present people you don't know to you, or whether you 're to depend on mother for that?"

"I suppose I'll find that out when the time comes."

"Do you know whether you ought to look beamingly happy or coolly composed?"

"Which do you prefer?"

Murray laughed. "A judicious mixture of both, I should say. Well, my small bride, ignorant as you profess to be of your part, I 'm not worried about you. Just the same, I expect we 'd better hunt up mother and be coached as to the precise line of conduct she expects of us. I 've never played the leading man's part in a bridal 'At Home' myself, and mother 's something of a stickler for doing things according to the latest revision of the code. Well, well," he added in surprise, glancing at his watch as they entered the hall, "it 's later than I thought. Do you need to go upstairs?"

"Just a minute — to smooth my unruly hair," and Jane ran away, leaving him gazing after her.

"Murray!" His mother came toward him from the library, a striking, even imposing, figure in black and white lace and amethysts. "Between you and Jane, I was getting anxious. I have n't seen the child since I went to her room, at least two hours ago."

"She is all ready — dressed early so she might run home, since I sent her word I should be late."

"But where is she now?"

"Ran upstairs to see if her hair was right. Is n't that the invariable custom at the last minute?"

"She is wearing her wedding-gown, of course?"

"She surely is."

"No ornaments?"

"I sent her some roses. She 'll carry them, or wear one, or something, I suppose."

"But no jewels?"

"I think she 's wearing the pearl pin I gave her."

"Murray! You are quite as bad as Jane! To be sure, her girlish way of dressing has been very pretty and appropriate in view of her father's lack of means. But her position now, as your wife, is different. Olive insists that Jane does not care for ornaments of any sort, but I am sure she would not object, Murray, to wearing that beautiful pearl necklace of Grandmother Town-

send's — if you explain to her that it 's an heirloom and that it will give me great pleasure to have her wear it? Pearls are not becoming to Olive," added Mrs. Townsend, and her son smiled.

"If you want Jane to wear that, mother, you will have to ask her yourself. She 's coming now, I think. Yes"—as Jane looked over the gallery rail and nodded down at him —"here she is. Do you really think she needs 'ornaments'? They strike me as superfluous."

Mother and son were watching Jane as she came down the staircase, her white figure outlined against the dark green of the palms and foliage. Her bronze-tinted hair shone like a crown under the radiance of the lights, and her softly blooming face made one forget the simplicity of her attire. At least, it made Murray forget it. But Mrs. Harrison Townsend saw in the white neck and arms a background for her pearls. She picked up a case from the table where she had laid it.

"My dear," she said, "you are very sweet, and I shall be very proud to present you as my daughter. And you won't mind wearing, to please me, these pearls of Murray's great-grandmother's, will you? They are just what you need to set off your colouring."

Jane's face grew warm as her eyes fell upon

the pearls, lying in a worn old case lined with faded green velvet. She looked from them to Murray — an appealing little glance and a questioning one. He nodded ever so slightly in return, smiling at her.

"You are very kind," said Jane, simply, to her mother-in-law. "I will wear them — if you wish."

She let Mrs. Townsend clasp the necklace, received that lady's kiss and approving comment on the difference it made in her appearance, and allowed herself to be led to a mirror to see the effect. As she stood before it, her lashes falling after one glance of a pair of unwilling eyes, somebody called Murray's mother away. Jane looked at her husband again.

"Yes, I know you hate it, little modesty," said he. "And I own I like to see you without any jewels. Yet there can be no doubt you become those pearls. You set them off, not they you. And seeing they 're not diamonds ——"

Jane's eyes flashed. "Not even for you ——"

His eyes responded with an answering brilliance, as he shook his head, laughing. "Not even for me! Are you sure? But you need n't fear. Diamonds, little Jane Townsend, were not made for you. Let those sparkle who want to. I prefer a steady glow!"

An hour later Ross McAndrew and Peter Bell, making their entrance to the long drawing-room together, and waiting their turn to advance toward the receiving party, exchanged a series of low-voiced comments, under cover of the general hum of talk.

"My word, Pete! Can that be our small girl, standing up there like a young queen? Watch her! I say, watch her!"

"I am watching her," said Peter, with great satisfaction. "If you see my eyes drop out, pick 'em up, will you?"

"Not that we might n't have expected it of her. I knew well enough she 'd be sweet and charming — but that little gracious manner — that self-possession — jolly, she's great!"

"Look at Murray! Is he proud of her, or is n't he?"

"Proud as Lucifer. And has a right to be. His mother looks pretty complacent herself. And Olive — she's stunning, as usual. But our Jane —"

The time to go forward had arrived. With head up and shoulders squared Peter led the way. As he passed his host and hostess he was a model of well-trained propriety, but when he reached Jane and Murray his formal manner relaxed, and he grasped each hand with a hearty grip.

"You 're a delightful pair," he murmured, "and the sight of you takes me off my feet."

"You look perfectly composed, even bored," retorted Murray, laughing, glad to greet a brother who could be relied upon not to say the usual thing.

But Jane whispered as she smiled up at him, "I 'm dreadfully frightened, Petey, and I can't do it well at all."

"Keep on being frightened, then," advised her brother. "The result 's perfectly satisfactory, is n't it, Murray?"

"You 're not really frightened?" whispered her husband, taking advantage of a slight lull in his duties to detain Peter. "She does n't look it, does she?"

"Not a bit."

"You 've only to look at mother," was Murray's comforting assurance, "to know that she 's entirely satisfied. If she were not — well — she 'd look different, that 's all!"

CHAPTER II

SHIRLEY HAS GROWN UP

AS PETER BELL abruptly rounded the corner from Gay Street into Worthington Square he saw coming toward him an attractive young figure in a white frock. He glanced at it and away again; then back, as he came nearer; once more away; then returned to look steadily, positive that his second impression had been the right one, after all. It must be that he knew this girl. If he did, he must give her a chance to recognise him.

She not only recognised him, she smiled outright, and stopping short held out her hand. The eyes which were laughing at him were eyes he had surely seen before.

Peter's hat had come off promptly; when she stopped, he stopped. When she held out her hand he took it, and stood staring down into the merry eyes with puzzled interest.

"O Mr. Peter Bell!" she jeered softly. "To be so slow to recognise an old friend — a connection of your own family. Dear, dear, you

should go to an oculist! Has it been coming on long? Can you still distinguish trees and houses?"

The voice told him who its owner was, though it was a degree richer in quality than when he had heard it last, two years before. "Shirley Townsend!" he cried. "Miss Shirley, I mean, of course. Well, well! No wonder I —— When did you come? And you 've grown up!"

"Of course I have. Has n't Nancy grown up? I 'm a year older than she, too. And I came last night — a whole month before they expected me. I was supposed to be going to stop in New York with Aunt Isabel for a month — after two long years away off in England at school! But Marian Hille's mother met her at the ship — she 's the girl who went with me, you know — and they came right along home. I could n't stand it to stop in New York, and I came with them. And you don't mean 'Miss Shirley' at all, of course — with Jane married to Murray!"

"Then you don't mean 'Mr. Peter Bell.'"

"You look terribly elderly yourself. But I knew you! The mere fact that you are not wearing the same clothes you were when I went away ——"

"It was n't your clothes — except the extension on the length of them. It was — it was ——"

"I understand. My hair is up. I no longer wear two big black bows behind my ears."

"Your cheeks," protested Peter. "You — the English air, I suppose ——"

"No, I 'm not a pale little, frail little girl any more, thanks to miles and miles of walking. You don't look very frail, either. Are n't we delightfully frank — after staring each other out of countenance? Is Nancy at home, and Mrs. Bell?"

"They 'll be delighted to see you."

"They 'll *know* me, too," laughed Shirley.

"She certainly has grown up," thought Peter, when Shirley had walked away from him toward Gay Street. He rather wished he had not been so obviously rushing away from home when he met this new-old acquaintance. The little Shirley had always been a good friend of his; the older Shirley looked distinctly better worth knowing. But Peter's days were busy ones; he had few moments for lingering by the side of pretty girls; nor was he wont to spend much time lamenting his deprivations.

Shirley Townsend's appearance at the door of the Bell house caused a flurry of welcoming. Nancy, after two minutes of shyness at the sight of her former chum looking so like and so unlike herself, discovered that the unlikeness was going

to make no difference. It was a great relief, for somebody who had seen Marian Hille at the end of one year at the English school had declared her grown insufferably consequential, and had prophesied that Shirley Townsend would come home "spoiled."

But almost the first remark Shirley made was, "Is n't Jane the dearest thing you ever saw? And are n't we just the luckiest people to get her into the family?" So then Nancy knew it was precisely the same Shirley, and was glad.

"I don't suppose she 's really as good-looking as Olive," commented Rufus, when he, too, had seen his old-time partner at tennis, and had had a game with her, "but she 's a lot more alive, and jollier, ten times over. And her playing form 's improved; she can serve a ball that keeps you up and doing for fair. She knows cricket too; she 's going to teach us. I 'm glad she 's got home. It 'll be a good deal pleasanter for Jane over there. Shirley won't go in for society, like Olive and Mrs. Harrison."

Rufus's prophecy proved a true one. Upon the second day after Shirley's return, Mrs. Townsend, Senior, announced — with some languor, as if she herself found summer affairs wearisome, after a winter which had been unusually full — that a garden-party and *musicale* would that

afternoon claim all four feminine members of the household. "Our men ought to go, too," she added, "but your father simply will go to nothing that takes him away from his business, and Murray seems to be lapsing into the same attitude. Forrest, when he is at home, is my only standby, but this freak of his to spend his time travelling makes him seldom to be counted on. Shirley, I hope you have something suitable to wear. It was a strange idea for you to come home, after being two years within an hour of London, with nothing but tennis suits and cricketing shoes. If you had stopped in New York, as I expected, your Aunt Isabel would have remedied all deficiencies in your wardrobe. But as it is——"

"As it is, I 've nothing suitable, mother mine. So you won't ask me to go, will you?"

"You must have something that will do. The Hildreths will expect you, now that every one knows you are at home. Marian Hille will be sure to be there, and you ought to be, quite as much."

"I 've had two years of Marie Anne — as she wishes to be called now. I can do without her very comfortably for a day or two," objected Shirley, smiling at Jane.

Jane was indeed rejoicing in her new young sister's return. The relations between herself

and Olive, although cordial and affectionate, were not based on so strong a congeniality of tastes as existed between Jane and Shirley. The girl, before she went away, had shown decided promise of originality and force of character. Looking at her now, as she stood before them in short tennis dress and fly-away hat, with vivacious, wide-awake face full of clear colour, it needed small discernment to make sure of the fact that here was a girl out of the common, and quite irresistibly out of the common, too.

"I don't like to insist, Shirley, and I would not, if you were showing the slightest fatigue after your journey. But since all the apology I could make for you would be that you preferred to play tennis in the sun with Nancy Bell ——"

"I see. It 's evident I must face the music — Miss Antoinette Southwode's searching soprano, and Mr. Clifford Burnham-Brisbane's wabbly tenor — and tea and little cakes. Since it 's my duty I 'll do it. But, mother dear, please don't make many engagements for me. Give it out that I 'm eccentric — that Miss Cockburn told me positively, before I came away from Helmswood, that after a severe course of study under her unexceptionable tutelage I must have absolute relaxation. Say that I have no fine clothes, no floppy hats covered with roses, suitable for lawn-

parties. Say anything, but after to-day don't make me go — unless I most awfully want to. Promise — *please!*"

Two firm tanned hands clasped themselves behind Mrs. Townsend's neck, two importunate black-lashed blue eyes looked at her beseechingly. The mother sighed.

"Child, what shall I do, with two of you? Here is Jane, accepting her invitations under protest, and now you are going to be still more unreasonable."

"Is Jane another? Then why not just make a simple division of labour? You and Olive play the society parts, and give Jane and me the domestic ones."

"My dear, nothing can be so unfortunate for a girl, or for a young married woman, as to become known as peculiar. Of course you are not serious — no girl of your age is ever serious in declaring that she wants nothing to do with society — but it distresses me to have you even talk as you are doing. Go and dress, and look your best, dear, and don't worry me with this sort of thing. I am quite worn out already. Doctor Warrener advises a course of baths at a rest-cure, and I think I shall have to follow his advice."

"I 'm sorry," and Shirley kissed her mother, with a pat upon the smooth white cheek, where

faint lines were beginning to show. Then she went away to dress, discarding the short skirt and canvas shoes with a smothered breath of regret, but appearing, in due course of time, in a costume eminently suitable for a garden-party, at least from her own point of view. Her mother did not see her until the carriage was at the door, and then it was too late for her to do more than to murmur:

"My dear, if that is the best you can do, I must take you to a dressmaker at once. White linen is well enough for some occasions, and that hat ——Did you tell me that Miss Cockburn advised it, and you got it in Bond Street? But the effect is decidedly more girlish than is necessary."

"I should think you would want me as infantile as possible, with Olive to do the dressy young lady. You and Jane and Olive, with your

'Ribbons and laces,
And sweet, pretty faces,'

need a plain little schoolgirl to set you off. And I shall not be 'out' until next winter. I 'm all right, mother dear. Miss Cockburn was always delighted with white linen, and discouraged fussy frocks. I 'm really beautifully 'English,' and you should be satisfied. Girls are n't allowed to grow up half so fast over there as here, and I think it is a sensible thing"

Mrs. Townsend said no more until, crossing the Hildreth lawn an hour later, she caught sight of Marian Hille. At the first opportunity thereafter, she said in Shirley's ear, "Miss Cockburn certainly did not advise Marian to cling to the schoolgirl style of dressing. If that is not a French frock she is wearing, my eyes deceive me. She is charming in it, too, and not at all overdressed. That rose-covered hat is exquisite, and quite girlish enough."

Shirley smiled, a protesting little smile, but she did not argue the question further. To her mind, "Marie Anne" looked like a Parisian fashion-plate, and her manner was certainly that of a young person of considerable social experience. Shirley did not like it. Her eye went from Miss Marian Hille to Mrs. Murray Townsend, and rejoiced at the contrast. The two were close together, taking their seats for the outdoor *musicale*, which was about to begin. No fault could possibly be found with Jane's attire, but in it she looked, beside Marian, like a dainty gray pigeon beside a golden pheasant.

"I beg your pardon, but may I ask what you are staring at so intently?" said a voice beside her, and Shirley turned to confront the interested gaze of Brant Hille, Marian's elder brother. "I 've been standing beside you here all of three

minutes, waiting for you to come back to earth and recognise me. Do you realise we have n't met since you and Marian came back? And won't you let me find you a chair over on the edge of the crowd, where we can talk?"

This suited Shirley, and she let him establish her in a corner where a clump of shrubbery screened the two from a part of the audience. Until the music began, young Hille plied her with questions about her experiences at Miss Cockburn's school, evidently enjoying the fact that her point of view seemed decidedly to differ from that of his sister.

"I should n't know you had been at the same place," was his whispered comment, as the first notes of the initial number on the programme smote the summer air and caused a partial hush to fall upon the assemblage. He had been noting, with interest, the change in her. He had known Shirley since their earliest days, but beyond the friendly liking she had always inspired in him, as in everybody, by her girlish good humour and love of sport, he had not thought her especially attractive. Now, however, as Peter Bell had done, he found himself discovering in her qualities distinctly noteworthy.

"So they took you to a lot of old churches and cathedrals," he began suddenly to Shirley, after

an interval during which they had listened politely to Miss Antoinette Southwode's truly "searching" soprano and Mr. Burnham-Brisbane's astonishingly "wabbly" tenor, intermingled in an elaborate Italian duet. "Did n't you find that sort of thing deadly dull?"

"Not a bit," denied Shirley, promptly. "It was such fun to hear the dear old vergers proudly recite the histories of the antiquities. And the antiquities themselves! In one very, very old church there was a tablet of a man and his six wives, all kneeling before a shrine. He knelt first and they came after, all in profile. The poor dears were all dressed alike — they must have worn the same dress, handed down. One's head was gone — that made her more touching than the others. You could n't help feeling that her husband had been harder on her than on the rest. He looked that sort, you see."

"No doubt he was," agreed Hille, laughing. "Did you see anything else equal to that?"

"No end of things. Of course there was ever so much that was dignified and beautiful, but one could n't help being glad to find something funny now and then. One tablet in another ancient chapel showed three men, one above another on their painted wooden tombs, all lying sidewise and half rising on their elbows,

and staring right down at you with their eyes wide open. They had pink cheeks and black hair. They were father, son, and grandson, and the father looked the youngest. Their wives were all lying quietly asleep at one side. It did n't seem fair for the men to be so wide awake, while the poor wives had to slumber and see nothing.— Oh, there goes Mr. Brisbane again! Why *does* his voice shake so much harder than when I heard him last?"

"He 's that much more celebrated," said Hille. "See here, are n't you and Marian about the same age."

Shirley shook her head. But when the song was over he asked the question again.

"I 'm three months older," admitted Shirley.

"She looks three years older. Why is it?"

Shirley shook her head again. It was one thing to air her views to her family, quite another to tell Brant that Marian was leaping into young ladyhood and its signs *too* fast. But Brant studied his sister. Her blond head, the hair elaborately waved, could be seen between the heads and shoulders in front, the striking rose-crowned hat conspicuous among other elaborate hats of all patterns.

"She looks twenty-five, at least," he commented, disapprovingly. "She looks older than you

sister Olive. And she seems to have that cad Maltbie glued to her for the afternoon. If that 's the best she can do, she 'd better take me. But she 's no use for brothers. Look here, when 's Forrest coming home?"

"I 've no idea. He was leaving Ecuador before the hot season began, and was intending to stay at Jamaica as long as it was comfortable. He wrote he might be off for the South Sea Islands soon. He 's had a tempting invitation."

"He 's a rover. His taste of army life gave him the fever. I wish he 'd get enough of it and come back. Things always 'go' while Forrest 's home."

Altogether, between Brant Hille and two or three other young people, Shirley found the garden-party endurable. But its cakes and ices spoiled her appetite for dinner, and the moment that meal was over, she was off to the tennis-court. Here she and Rufus played several sets in so spirited a fashion that Murray and Jane, strolling over the lawn to watch them, were moved to comment upon Shirley's vigour.

"I 'm just working off the garden-party," declared the girl, when her brother asked the cause of so much energy upon so warm an evening.

"You should have put on your tennis skirt, dear," said Jane, as Shirley came up to her, racquet in hand.

"So I ought, but I was afraid mother would be made ill by the sight of me, if I did, after dinner. Oh, how good it is to be at home! Let 's camp down here on the grass and send for the rest of the clan. Run over, Rufie, will you, and get all the Bells that will come?"

As she spoke, Shirley dropped upon the smooth turf close by the big wicker chair that Murray had just drawn up for Jane, on the terrace at the edge of the court. Her cheeks were flushed by the lively exercise she had been taking, her hair curled moistly about her forehead. Jane looked at her with a touch of envy in her affectionate glance. Being Mrs. Murray Townsend, she supposed it became her to sit demurely in a chair, instead of putting herself, as she longed to do, beside Shirley, on the grass. But Murray, with no such restraining thought in his head, cast himself upon the turf beside his sister, at his wife 's feet.

Presently Rufus returned, bringing Nancy and Ross McAndrew. Olive, spying the group upon the lawn, came trailing out in all her pretty finery of the afternoon. Two or three young neighbours appeared. By and by Peter Bell, just home from the paper-factory, looked across from the Gay Street porch and descried the distant group. Somebody had brought a banjo, and somebody

else was essaying to sing a boating-song to the accompaniment.

"Shall I go over?" thought Peter, when he had had his bath and his supper, and had come out upon the porch again.

He was quite alone, for his mother, after serving his supper, had hurried out to see a neighbour who had been long ill, and who depended upon Mrs. Bell for her daily cheer. Mr. Bell had driven out to Grandfather Bell's farm. The little house seemed strangely silent, and the porch, in the early summer twilight, more companionable. A hammock swung behind the vines, and after a moment's indecision, Peter stretched his long form in it, clasping his hands under his head. He was unusually weary, for the day had been very hot. He lay quietly listening to the distant "plunkings" of the banjo and to the faint sounds of talk and laughter which floated across the space to him. So, after a little, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the sound of voices on the step. The Bell porch, unlike that of the Townsends, possessed no electric lamps, and the nearest illumination to-night came from an arc-light on the corner. Peter, in his hammock, lay shrouded wholly in darkness. He could see a gleam of white between the vines which shel-

tered him, and the voices were those of his sister Nancy and Shirley Townsend.

"It 's such a relief," Shirley was saying, "to get away from that banjo. I seem to have been listening all day to the sorts of music I like least. Rodman Fielding and his banjo are the last straw. Nan, what do you suppose is the matter with me that I don't seem to care for the things most girls do — clothes and boys and — banjos. I detest banjos!"

"What do you care for?" Nancy asked. "Tennis, anyhow. And you like Rufus and Ross and Peter, don't you? As for banjos — I don't think anybody thinks they 're very musical. They just like the funny songs that go with them."

"Rufus is like a brother, and Ross like an uncle — a young one. As for Peter — I don't seem to know Peter. He 's changed. What 's he been doing to make him look so old and sober? I almost thought I saw a gray hair — and he 's no older than Murray."

"Peter old and sober?"—Peter himself was growing fairly awake, although not fully enough roused to the situation to realise that he was playing eavesdropper.—"What an idea! He has n't changed a particle. Gray hair! It could n't be. Why, Peter 's stronger than all the rest of us put together!"

"He 's been taxing his strength, then. He looks as if he had been carrying loads of responsibility — solving problems — worrying over some he could n't solve. He's working too hard."

Nancy laughed incredulously, and said that Peter's work was quite the same as it had been, and that her friend's absence had made her see things unnaturally. But Peter's eyes, in the darkness, opened wide. Here was extraordinary discernment for a nineteen-year-old girl, who had met him only once since her return, casually upon the street, during which time she had merely laughed at him for not knowing her immediately, and then had walked on. Was it possible that she had seen that which he had been carefully guarding from the eyes of his family for a long, long time, and at which even his mother did not guess?

But here was Shirley again, speaking low and thoughtfully: "I seem to see everybody, since I came home, as if I had never seen them before. I see father looking as if he thought it did n't pay to have made so much money, after all; and mother looking worn-out playing the grand lady; Olive following after, and not finding much in it. Murray and Jane absorbed in each other, but Jane wishing — no, I 'll not say what I think Jane is wishing. She would n't admit it, I know.

Ross and Rufus and you, busy and happy. Your father and mother contented as ever. But Peter ——"

It would not do. He was fully awake now. If she was going on to talk about him again he must let her know he was there. Besides, if she really divined something of the truth, he must not let her make Nancy anxious.

Shirley had paused with his name upon her lips, as if soberly thinking. Peter sat up. But at the fortunate instant a figure dashed across Gay Street.

"You runaways!" Rufus called, reproachfully. "A fine hostess you are, Shirley Townsend! They 're asking for you. You 'll have to come back."

So they went away and Peter was left alone upon the porch. There was a queer feeling tugging at his heart. Nobody else had seen, nobody else had even noticed the slightest change in him. Of course it was not possible that Shirley could know the least thing about his situation, but it was something that she appreciated one fact — that he was working to the limit of his capacity, and that, although he was not yet overdone, the strain was beginning to tell. Not the strain of work, but the greater and more exhausting drain of anxiety.

CHAPTER III

LUNCHEON FOR TWELVE

"MRS. MURRAY, Mrs. Townsend would like you to come to her room, if you please."

"Yes, Sophy, certainly. Is Mrs. Townsend's headache better this morning?"

"It's very bad, Mrs. Murray. And she's that upset about the luncheon she's giving. Cook's taken sick, too — the bad luck!"

"Since breakfast, Sophy?"

"'T was Norah and Mary served breakfast. Cook but got out of bed and went back. Mr. Townsend bade me send for the doctor. He says she 'll not leave her bed again the day. And Mrs. Townsend says the luncheon must go on, and not a bit of outside help to be had at this short notice."

Jane hurried down the hall, Sophy's laments in her ears. She found Olive sitting on the foot of her mother's bed talking perturbedly with the elder woman, in the effort to dissuade her from the purpose of attempting to entertain any guests whatever in the circumstances. But it

became evident to Jane at once that Mrs. Townsend was not to be dissuaded.

"There must be somebody to be had," she asserted, as Jane drew up a chair, after laying a cool hand on the aching forehead and expressing her sympathy with the headache. "It can't be possible that Lemare could n't send me somebody if he understood the necessity — or Perceval. We don't need much done. Cook had all the preliminary baking done yesterday. It's only to get everything together."

"But that's the whole of it, mother," Olive urged. "You may say it's only a simple luncheon, but Norah and Mary are certainly not equal to it. Is n't it excuse enough to send those women word that you 're ill? I 'll telephone — or write notes, if you prefer."

She rose as she spoke, but Mrs. Townsend waved an agitated hand, and shook her head violently. "You don't understand," she moaned, pressing her hand to her head and falling back among the pillows. "There are reasons why I can't have this thing fail. Mrs. Arlo Stevenson is a most difficult person to get for any affair whatever — and this is particularly in her honour. I could have had a caterer, of course, but I consider it not good form to put small entertaining into any hands but one's cook's. I am indebted

to Mrs. Wister very deeply, and she is bringing a guest whom she is very anxious to have meet Mrs. Stevenson. There are other reasons ——"

"But, mother"—Olive's tone was growing impatient—"what can't be, can't be. We can't get any one."

"Perhaps I could do it," Jane began, with some hesitation. "If it's really a simple luncheon ——"

"It is!" Mrs. Townsend spoke with eagerness.

"I might not be able to manage the most elaborate dishes ——"

"Cook can't be too ill to tell you what is necessary."

"But, mother," Olive protested, "Jane must be at the table. She can't be in the kitchen, sending in courses."

"That's of no consequence," declared Jane, quickly. "I don't mind missing the luncheon in the least."

"They are all older women," murmured Mrs. Townsend, closing her eyes wearily. When Olive took things in hand, it was always difficult to oppose her.

"Yes, but Jane is our bride. And you expect me to be there. If Jane stays in the kitchen, so shall I."

"I don't know what to do," and the poor

lady on the bed, among her pillows, looked as if she were indeed suffering.

There was a minute's silence. Then Jane spoke with gentle decision.

"Olive, dear, that is very nice of you, but I truly don't mind in the least. It is n't as if you had n't already introduced me everywhere, and I had n't been entertained over and over. If mother's guests are older ladies, my absence surely won't be noticed. And I 'd love to try what I can do. You know I 've had years of training at cookery, and if I can't manage all of Cook 's dishes, perhaps I can substitute others that are n't at all common. I can promise at least that nothing will be burned."

"You are a dear child," said Mrs. Townsend fervently. She wiped away a nervous tear or two.

Olive followed Jane to her room to watch her new sister exchange her morning dress for one more suitable for the affairs she meant to take in hand.

"This is going to be fun," said Jane gaily.

"I don't see how you can think so. It 's certainly very foolish of mother to persist against all odds. One would think her life depended on that luncheon."

"It does — in a way. Her poor nerves are quite worn out. I 've seen it for a long time. Having things go wrong just now is the last straw."

"Why, Jane, what 's going to happen?" called Shirley, five minutes later, encountering Jane on the stairs which led to the servants' rooms on the third floor. Shirley had been up to see Cook, who adored her.

"Is Bridget able to see me?" asked Jane.

"She 'll be much flattered. It 's sciatica, and it lays her low, but she can converse with intelligence, even with brilliancy. She 's in a terrible state over not being able to get up that luncheon."

"I 'm going to hold a council of war with her," and Jane disappeared into Cook's room.

Half an hour later she came out again, her eyes dancing with anticipation, pencil and paper in hand. As she ran downstairs, Sophy came up with a tray, and caught the overflow of Bridget's emotions.

"The cleverness of her!" exclaimed the invalid. "To take the menyou into her own pretty hands and think she can see to it all! She can, too, or I 'm deceived. Consultin' with me and gettin' my directions, and tellin' me where she makes bold to follow, and where she 's not quite sure. It 's a pity she 's not mistress of the house in Mrs. Townsend's place — and her so wore out she ought to be at a sanitarium this minute. Look to it, Sophy, that Norah and Mary does their duty by Mrs. Murray this day.

If they 're inclined to be triflin', bid them come up to me. I 'll soon put them in mind of what Mr. Murray says to me when he brought home his wife. 'Whatever you do to please her will be appreciated,' he says, 'by me.' And it 's nothing I would n't do for Mr. Murray and Miss Shirley, these seven years I 've lived here. And now I 'm feelin' the same way toward Mrs. Murray."

Whether it was the potency of the message which reached scullery maid and waitress by way of Sophy, or whether it was Jane's own engaging manner, together with the respect she soon inspired by the assured and competent way in which she "took hold," there could be no question that by the end of the first hour not only Norah and Mary, but also Ellen, the laundress, were flying about as they had rarely done before, even for Bridget, who certainly knew how to get out of them work enough and to spare.

At a moment when they chanced to be all together, Jane had said to them, as with deft fingers she mixed a bowlful of ingredients, that if with their help she could only bring about the serving of a luncheon which the guests would like to eat, she should be happier than over any entertainment she herself had ever been offered. And she had been able to tell from their smiling,

interested faces that she was to have from that moment the best service they could give her.

Shirley, when affairs were well under way, had gone to the telephone and called up Murray's office.

"I want you to come home for a few minutes at two o'clock!" she said, imperatively.

"What for? Anything the matter?" asked her brother.

"Not a thing," said Shirley, reassuringly. "But there's something happening up here at the house that you must see."

"I 'm pretty busy."

"You 'll never forgive yourself, when you hear about it, if you don't see with your own eyes."

"All right, I 'll try to make it. Anything connected with Jane?"

"Of course. Do you suppose I 'd ask you if it was n't?"

"I'll be there."

"I thought you would," and Shirley laughed as she hung up the receiver. No doubt Murray was a happy man.

"Do you suppose Jane is going to be able to do it?" queried Mrs. Townsend, dressing with the help of Shirley and Sophy. As the hour for the arrival of her guests approached, doubts were beginning to assail her. Jane was no

doubt an extremely capable young matron, but the preparing of such a luncheon as Bridget had planned meant not only accomplished cookery, but much skill and care in the details of serving. Had Jane's eyes been open during the brief period of her entertainment at various fine tables? It was too late to do anything but hope so.

"Don't worry, mother," Shirley had urged. "Jane 's doing wonders. If she can keep it up she 'll surprise you."

"I had a bit sip of the booly-on just now when I was down in the kitchen," offered Sophy, "and it was elegant. And you know yourself 'm, Bridget says that's one of the most trying things of all to get tasty."

Mrs. Townsend went wanly down into her rooms, to find flowers all about, distributed by Olive's skilful fingers. She looked into the dining-room. Her table was faultlessly laid, to the last detail, and a charming arrangement of lilies was mirrored in the polished mahogany.

"Now come and rest until the last minute," urged Shirley. "And don't worry. Mrs. Arlo Stevenson won't have a thing to criticise — except the conversation."

An hour afterward, Murray, letting himself in with his latch-key, found Shirley awaiting him inside the door. "Don't say a word," she whis-

pered. "Just walk straight past the dining-room without looking in. Mother 's entertaining Mrs. Stevenson at luncheon, you know, and it 's a very solemn occasion."

Wondering, Murray, hat in hand, followed his sister as she walked demurely by the wide entrance to the dining-room, from within which he could hear a subdued murmur of voices. But once past, she hurried him, by a circuitous route, to a narrow hallway at the back of the house, which led to the kitchen. Here she stationed him, and bade him push the door open a cautious crack and peep within. He obeyed her. Shirley stood behind him, alive with anticipation, while she watched her brother's shoulders.

Shirley could not see his face, but she heard his subdued exclamation as he gazed at the scene within. She knew what it was. The luncheon had reached the salad course. Jane was arranging plates picturesque with an enticing combination of ingredients, parti-coloured, crisp and cool. Her fair arms were bared to the elbow, her cheeks were flushed. At her right hand Mary was ready with assistance, her eyes respectfully studying the arrangement — not of the salad, but of her young mistress's hair, which was certainly worth studying for its effective simplicity. The maid could never hope to match that daintiness

of arrangement with her own ash-coloured locks, but she meant to try.

Murray turned about at last. "Well, by Jove!" he exploded, softly. "How does this come about?"

Shirley noiselessly closed the door and explained in a whisper. Murray's eyes grew eloquent as he listened. "The little trump!" was his comment. "I wish I could stay till she 's finished. I suppose it would n't do to call her out now?"

"Mercy, no! You might upset her. So far I don't think the least thing has gone wrong."

"What possessed mother to put the thing through, anyhow? Jane ought to be in there with the others."

"It was something about entertaining Mrs. Arlo Stevenson. Mother felt it must be done, though the heavens fell. They nearly did fall, till Jane came under and held them up. As for Jane's being at the table — she did n't want to be there. And Olive would n't be, without her, so there's nothing noticeable. They 're all women of mother 's age — on some special board of charities, or something like that, that makes them congenial."

"Its making them congenial does n't necessarily follow, unfortunately. So Olive stayed

out, did she? That's one count for Olive. Why is n't she helping Jane, though?"

"Jane would n't have either of us in the kitchen. Olive did the flowers, and Norah and I the table. I got in an English fashion or two that will either drive mother to distraction or fill her with pride. I forgot to tell her," and Shirley began to laugh. She led Murray away to safer regions, but he looked at his watch and said he must be off.

"Was n't it worth coming up for?" she demanded.

"No question of that. Much obliged for letting me know. I 'll settle with Jane later. Take her out for a drive, or something, to cool her off, will you? Good bye!" And Murray vanished, smiling to himself. "That ought to make her pretty solid with mother," he reflected, as he raced to his car.

But when the last guest had rustled away, Mrs. Townsend was in no condition to fall upon Jane's neck and overwhelm her with thanks. Instead she had to be carried to her room by Phelps, the coachman — summoned in haste from the stable — and put to bed by her daughters. Her physician arrived in short order, and his edict, when he had telephoned for a nurse, was stern.

"When you society women stop putting yourselves through a grind that no strong man could

stand up under, you will get a grip upon your nerves," said he. "Mrs. Townsend was at the end of her forces two months ago, and I told her so. She has simply been keeping up on will — with the inevitable result. The moment she is fit to travel she must get off to the quietest place on my list—and stay there. Home would be a better place for her, if she would obey the rules; but she won't, so that settles it. And you, Miss Olive "—he turned abruptly to the elder daughter of the house —"would do well to go with her. It's evident you've been travelling along the same road."

"O Doctor Warrener, how absurd you are! I'm perfectly well. And I've half a dozen invitations to lovely places. They'll do me far more good than going to some invalid resort and taking baths."

He shook his head. "You're all alike," said he. "I may talk till I'm dumb — you'll pay the price. And when you've paid it, you'll remember."

"There are two," said Olive, indicating Jane and Shirley, "who will never have nervous prostration on account of overdoing society."

Doctor Warrener surveyed them, and the grimness of his face relaxed. "I'll acquit them on their faces," said he. "Tell your husband, Mrs. Murray, to shut you up in a bandbox — or,

better, take you off West to that place where he got back his health — before he lets you drift into the swirl. As for Shirley," —he laid his hand upon her shoulder — "if I 'm any reader of destiny — and I ought to be — she 's going to swing that tennis racquet for several years yet before she gives up and settles down."

All this had happened before Mr. Townsend and Murray came home. Mrs. Townsend's breakdowns after fatigue in fulfilling her engagements, and the summoning of the doctor, had become too frequent occurrences to imply the sending for her husband. The orders away, for rest and recuperation, were also, within the last few years, of semi-annual recurrence.

"It simply means," said Murray, pacing with Jane up and down the long flower-bordered walk between the house and the tennis-court, "it simply means six weeks or two months for you to try your hand at being mistress of the establishment. And judging by what I saw that hand do to-day ——"

Jane looked quickly up at him.

"I should say that it was competent to run anything. That salad was a — what do women say? — a symphony — a star. Not that I care much for salads myself, but to see you putting it together ——"

"Murray — you didn't!"

"Did n't I? You had on a pink-and-white checked apron that came up over your shoulders. Your sleeves were short, and your hair curled round your ears, the way it does on damp days. You ——"

"Where were you? How did you know? Who ——"

"I was on the other side of the door, which you forgot to lock. Never in my life was I so bowled over by the sight of a girl in a kitchen."

"If I had known you were looking ——"

"Precisely. That was why Shirley would n't let me call you out. Of course I should have kissed you — I never felt more like it — and that might have endangered the composition of the salad."

"I 'm afraid it would," laughed Jane. "As it was, I made the one real mistake of the luncheon — I sent that salad in on the game plates! The girls were in such a flurry they did n't notice till the plates began to come out again. I hope mother did n't mind very much."

"I 'll warrant nobody else did. Mrs. Arlo Stevenson is as short-sighted as an owl in the daytime, and as I understand it, Mrs. Stevenson was the guest who counted — goodness knows why! I think she 's insufferable. I 'm glad

mother 's got her off her mind, for the time being. It will give her a chance to recuperate. Poor mother! She misses a lot of fun, does n't she?"

"She thinks it 's we who miss it."

"Perhaps we can show her better some day — when we 've been very good and earned that house by ourselves. Hi! What?" exclaimed Murray. "How you jumped! Did you think that house by ourselves was n't really to materialise some day?"

"I — was n't sure." Jane's voice was low. She did not mean to show how much she cared, or how she longed to believe definitely in a prospect which, as yet, had not been in so many words held out to her.

"Why, it 's a certainty! Have n't I made that clear, little girl? You know, when I told you how anxious father was to have us live with them, I said it would n't be for all time. Don't you remember that?"

"I know. But I thought ——"

"You thought, I see, it meant while he needed me, which would be as long as he lived. No, he does n't insist on that. It was to be only while he stayed an active partner in the business. He wanted me at his elbow, and I did n't feel like refusing him. He means to retire within five years — or sooner, if his health shows signs of

breaking. Then he understands that I 'm to have a home by myself — build one, you know. Well, well, what a squeeze my arm is getting! Are you so glad?"

"I 'm pretty glad. It 's not that — that this place is n't pleasant, and everybody more than kind, but ——"

"You need n't be afraid to tell me — in fact, you don't need to tell me. You 're too much of a born Jenny Wren not to want to feather your own nest. And I want to see you do it. We 'll begin to look over plans. We can talk about it and think about it ——"

"No, we can't, Murray."

"Why not? Is n't anticipation ——"

"Yes, but it would make it harder to wait Now I know it 's sure, I can ——"

"Be good?" said her husband. "You are being good — heavenly. What you did to-day — well, if you could have known what I thought about you when I saw you out there putting those pretty shoulders to the domestic wheel — proud is n't the name for it. And let me tell you, Janey Townsend, it is n't every girl who could take command of the forces and have them working for you at the top of their ability, like that. Norah has n't a nose and chin of that perky shape for nothing; and Mary can soldier

for fair when she chooses. As for Sophy — but you had Sophy for your own from the start. And it 's not been done with tips, either, has it? Honestly, now, have you ever given Sophy a tip since you came to the house?"

"A tip?" said Jane. "Money, you mean? Why, no. Should I? I never thought of it. Does she expect it?"

"She probably does n't now — from you — or want it, as long as you reward her with your smiles and ask about her invalid brother, the way I overheard you doing the other day. She'd probably rather have your friendly interest than all Olive's dollar bills. Oh, there are several ways of winning people's loyalty, dear — and yours is the best. Only everybody can't do it. Do you know, gentle Jane, I 'm a good deal interested in seeing you in the rôle of mistress of this house for a while?'

"Murray, I 'm so doubtful about it!"

"You need n't be. The commanding officer who has proved to his regiment that in an emergency he can work with them, shoulder to shoulder — and work better than they can — need have no fears. It 'll just be a case of 'Bridget, Norah, Sophy, Mary, Ellen — fall in! Shoulder arms! March!' And off the regiment will go, heads up, chests out, eyes to the front."

CHAPTER IV

POT-HOOKS

"I WANT to have a talk with you, Murray."

"All right, sister, I 'm at your service."

"Please come over to the seat beyond the shrubbery, where nobody will see or hear. It 's not a very suitable place, but it 's better than the house this hot night."

"Not a suitable place?" queried Murray, as he followed Shirley across the lawn. "Not so fast, child. It is a hot night, and I 've only just cooled off since dinner. It was insufferable in the office to-day — or would have been if anybody had had time to stop and think about it. Why is n't that romantic seat beyond the shrubbery just the place to talk?"

"Because the talk has no romance about it. The office would be the place for it, only you 've no time to give me if I should come there."

"You excite my curiosity." Murray disposed himself comfortably upon the wide rustic seat, screened from all beholders without and within the grounds, not only by shrubbery and hedges,

but by the fast deepening July twilight. "Fire away. Anything gone wrong?"

"Nothing — except me."

"You alarm me."

"Don't joke. I 'm serious."

"I see you are. And that's what alarms me. Seriousness, at eighteen ——"

"I 'm nineteen — nearly twenty. And I 'm not only serious — I 'm cross. Murray, I want something to do."

"Have n't you plenty? Jane tells me she could n't get on without you."

"Jane is a dear. And I love to help her. But I want to be doing something — else. I want to amount to something. I want to learn something."

"Miss Cockburn's finishing-school did n't finish then? Is college the bee you have in your bonnet?"

"No, I 'm afraid I 'm too unsettled for that now — I don't know why. Once I spent a whole week trying to convince mother I must go to college instead of to school in England. But I don't want that any more. I want — Murray, please don't laugh when I tell you!"

"Why should I laugh? It 's plain you mean business of some sort, and I 'm honoured by your confidence. Go ahead, little girl, and don't be afraid of your big brother."

"Well, then, I want to learn stenography and typewriting." It came with a rush, and after it Shirley sat still, one hand holding the other tightly while she waited for the explosion she expected.

It did not come. Murray turned his head until she could feel that he was looking directly at her through the dim light. He sat up slightly, and thrust his hands deeper down into his pockets — a masculine action which usually indicates concentration of attention. He was silent for a full minute before he spoke. When he did speak, it was in the tone that one man uses to another when the basis of their intercourse is that of mutual respect.

"Would you mind giving me your idea? It's plain you have thought something out to the end. I need to know it from the beginning, if you want any advice worth while."

"I can, now I know that you're not going to knock me down with arguments against it before you know mine for it."

"That would be poor policy. That's the boomerang sort of argument—the one that comes back at one's self. Besides, I've too much confidence in my sister's good judgment to believe that she would fire a proposition like that at me without a reason back of it."

"The reason is easy. I'm restless for something to do. I don't want to be a next season's débutante, and go through a winter like the five Olive has spent. I want to work. I want to fit myself to be independent. If anything should happen to father's money, I don't want to be like the Desmond girls after their father's failure, as helpless as baby birds pushed out of the nest. Olive could n't do a thing. Forrest is just an idler. You have Jane to take care of. But I — I could be learning to support myself."

"The business is in fine condition. We never were so substantial a firm as now. There 's very little danger of our going to pot."

"That may be," said Shirley, "though things do happen, Murray, out of a clear sky. But that's not my real reason. My real reason is a genuine, great big longing to amount to something. I never come down to the office without envying the girls I see there. I envy them because they have to do it — because they 're supporting themselves and somebody else by it."

"Do you mean that you would like a position in our office?"

"Oh, would n't I! If I could study and study, and practise and practise, and then some day take a dictation from you or father and bring

you a perfect copy, I believe I 'd be — Murray, I 'd be the happiest girl that ever lived!"

"You mean that, do you?"

"I do."

"Have you thought that if you took a position in our office, or in any other, you 'd be shutting out some poor girl who really needs the salary?"

"Yes, I 've thought of it. I know that 's an argument against it. But, Murray, don't you think the rich men's daughters need employment sometimes quite as much as the poor ones do? Why, I 'm telling you I envy the poor ones!"

"I know; but the fact remains that they need the money, and you don't."

"Are n't you keeping some poor man out of the salary you get by taking the place of father's right hand man?"

Murray laughed. "There's a back-hander for me! But I 'm practically a partner, you know, and a firm can't do without its heads, no matter how many poor fellows would like the job."

"And you have the right to make something of yourself. But I have n't because I should be taking work away from some girl who needs it. I don't want to do that. I 'd work for nothing, or give my salary away."

"Ah, but that would n't solve the problem.

The girl whose job you took from her would n't accept your salary from you."

"Then, just because a girl's father can support her, must she give up learning how to support herself? And the fun of doing it?"

"What do you expect the family to say about it?"

"Of course they won't like it. Except father. I think he will."

"Possibly, after you have wheedled him and hung round his neck. Well, do you feel you have a right to disappoint mother and Olive, as you will do, if you so much as begin on this course, to say nothing of sticking to it?"

Shirley was silent for a moment. Then she answered, very gently, "I should be sorry for that, of course, but I think I have the right Devoting one's self to society can't be a duty one owes to one's family, if one does n't feel satisfied with that life. And my learning to earn my own living won't disgrace my family—not in these days of millionaire milliners and violet raisers."

"No, it won't disgrace your family. Instead, it makes one member of it sit up and look at his small sister with a good deal of respect. If you take hold of the thing, you 'll go through with it. I 've not the least doubt of that, for you 're no quitter."

"Thank you. Then will you go with me to talk with father about it?"

"When?"

"Now. He's in the library."

Murray got up. "You are in earnest," he remarked. "Yes, I'll go with you. But you'll find the question will have to be pretty thoroughly threshed out with him before he agrees. He employs none but experts; you'll have to win your spurs before you can wear them. And good stenographers are born, not made. If you've got it in you, you'll succeed; if you have n't, you won't, no matter how hard you try."

He could not see his sister's eyes, but he could read the determination in her voice as she answered that it was the expectation of winning those spurs that made her heart jump just to think about it.

It was a fortnight after this talk, and the longer and more earnest one which succeeded it, that, coming away from the factory one warm July afternoon at an earlier hour than usual, Peter Bell happened upon his young neighbour in a most unexpected place. Far downtown, blocks below the usual shopping district, he saw Shirley Townsend come out of a doorway and start rapidly up the street. She had not seen him, and he was too far away to call to her, so he was forced

to quicken his pace almost to a run to overtake her at the next corner before she signalled her car.

She had walked so fast that the best he could do was to run and swing himself aboard the same car just as it got under way. The car was full, and Shirley herself was obliged to stand, clinging to a strap. Peter secured a strap beside her. There was little chance for conversation during the long ride uptown, but Peter's eyes were observant, and he noticed a peculiarity in Shirley's attire.

At an hour in the afternoon when the girls of her sort would all be wearing light frocks and ribbons, Shirley was dressed like the girls in the office he had just left. With a difference — which Peter's eyes also discerned, although he could not have told just where the difference lay. Shirley's white blouse, her blue serge skirt, her sailor hat, her trim shoes, all bore about them the stamp of quality, indefinable, yet not to be denied.

As for her face, Peter thought he had never seen it so alight with life. The smile she had flashed at him was brilliant. He was glad he had caught the car. It was a decided enlivenment of the long ride, monotonous with daily repetition, just to stand beside the trim, swaying figure, and occasionally exchange a word

with its possessor. Besides, he was feeling not a little curiosity as to the errand which had taken her to a place where hung the sign of a well-known commercial college.

"It is a hot day, is n't it?" observed Shirley, when he had handed her off the car, and they were walking up Gay Street toward Worthington Square. "Just the day to get into the country. I 'd like a gallop over about ten miles of good roads — just to feel the wind in my face."

"It would be great, would n't it?" agreed Peter.

She looked up at him. "You and Olive don't ride as much as you used to."

"She has n't seemed to care for it for the last year or so."

"Has n't she asked you to ride Grayback whenever you wanted?"

"She 's been very kind about offering him. But I don't like to go over and order him out myself."

"He 's pining for exercise. So is Pretty Polly, though I had one short canter on her before breakfast. You 've never been out with me on horseback. Perhaps you don't know I can ride."

"I have my eyesight. And as for inviting you to go with me — how can I, when you have the horses? If you 're asking me to go with

you — there 's nothing on earth I 'd rather do just now."

"I believe that," thought Shirley, as she ran into the house to change her clothes. "If ever a man looked as if he 'd like to drop his cares and get off on a horse's back, Peter does to-day."

In a few minutes she was crossing the lawn, in her riding habit, crop in hand. Peter met her, himself in riding trim. His face showed his pleasure in the prospect, as he put her up and swung into his own saddle.

"'If wishes were horses,'" he quoted, as they turned toward the Northboro road. "And sometimes they are. An hour ago I was looking out of the office window at the factory, and wishing for this very sort of thing. I ought to see Grandfather Bell. Do you mind if we go that way?"

"I 'm fond of that way. It will give us a good gallop down the old turnpike, and a cool walk through the woods to freshen the horses."

Once out of the city they were off at a brisk trot, talking a little now and then, but mostly busy with thoughts. They had seen so little of each other since Shirley's return that a sense of having begun a new acquaintanceship hampered them both. They had not yet found common ground.

"Now for the gallop," said Shirley, as they

rounded a turn and came out upon a long, level stretch of road, with few vehicles in sight.

"This is the spot where your sister lost most of her hairpins, when she took her first ride with me," said Peter, indicating to Grayback that a change of pace was in order. "I don't think she 'd ever had such a dashing get-away before. Off, are you? Well, well, you do mean business, don't you? All right, I 'm with you. But don't expect me to recover the hairpins!" he called, as Grayback picked up the pace Pretty Polly had set.

But both Pretty Polly and her rider were evidently on their mettle, and Grayback, bigger and longer of stride though he was, had to look to his heels to keep up with the little brown mare.

Shirley proved a daring rider, and before she finally pulled Polly down to a canter she certainly had felt the wind in her face with a rush.

When she looked round at Peter, as they entered the mile-long course of wood-shaded road which succeeded the turnpike, she met a brighter smile than she had seen on his face since she came home, two months before. Once more, for the moment, he looked the care-free boy again.

"You may be a pupil of the riding-schools, but you 've taken plenty of road-training since,"

was his comment. "And not a hairpin loose, so far as I can see."

"That's because I always tie my mop with a ribbon for riding, like any schoolgirl. It's childish, but comfortable. Isn't this deliciously cool in here? And I've forgotten all about the pothooks already." But having said this, Shirley bit her lip. She had not meant to tell yet.

"Pothooks?" repeated Peter, curiously. "Have you been bothered by pothooks lately?"

"A trifle." She turned away her head, and pointed out a fine clump of ferns, growing on a bank by the roadside.

"Do you want them?" he asked.

"No, no, not enough to get down for. I — said something I did n't mean to, and the ferns offered a way of escape."

Peter was silent, wondering what she could mean.

Then Shirley said, frankly:

"That sounds rude, and I 'm going to tell you."

"Not because something slipped out. I won't even guess at it, unless you want me to."

"I do — now. I think I 'd like to tell you, though not even Nancy knows yet. My family do — but I don't think even they quite realise what it means to me. Perhaps you would."

"I 'd like to try."

"I — have begun to study stenography," said Shirley. "When I 've learned it — and typewriting — thoroughly, I 'm to have a place in Murray's office."

She said it with her eyes looking straight between her horse's ears; and she did not see the quick, astonished glance which fell upon her.

Peter made no answer for so long that she turned, wondering and a little resentful.

"I beg your pardon," said Peter. "I believe I forgot to answer. But that was n't from lack of interest. You took my breath away. When I got it back I fell to thinking that I might have expected it of you."

"You might? Why?"

"I 'm not good at telling my thoughts. But I knew you had a mind of your own from the day you first gave Nancy Bell of Gay Street the preference over the little Hille girl of Worthington Square."

"Gay Street was sixteen times more interesting than Worthington Square, always," declared Shirley, frankly.

"How do you like the pothooks?"

"I 'm going to like them, whether they 're likable or not. Just now I 'm in a sort of delirium over them. Little black quirls and dots and dashes walk through my dreams. I 've had

just one week of it now, and I 'm fascinated. The only trouble is, I want to get hold of everything at once."

"Hold steady and make sure as you go. Slow accuracy at first is much better than a fast jumble that you can't read yourself. If you like it, and are getting hold of it already, that shows you are going to win out. It 's easy to tell, from the start, who 'll make a stenographer in the end and who won't."

"That 's what Murray says, and it encourages me. You 've studied it yourself, then?"

"Taught myself in odd hours; thought it might be useful some time, and it has been, many times. I can show you a lot of technical short cuts that will be of use to you, when you 're familiar with the regular method."

"Oh, thank you — I 'll be grateful. Come Polly — you 've cooled off — try a smooth little canter for a while."

At Grandfather Bell's Peter took Shirley down and sent her to roam about the great orchard, while he hunted up the old gentleman and had a talk with him. This consumed nearly an hour, and when they were off upon the road once more, Shirley discovered that the carefree look had vanished from her companion's face, and that his mouth had taken again the

grave expression it had acquired after she went away to school.

She let him ride to the edge of the woods, four miles toward home, in the abstracted silence which had fallen upon him; but as they came under the first cool shadows, she brought Pretty Polly down to a walk, and began to talk lightly about Murray and Jane, and the successful way in which Jane had taken up the cares of managing the big house and its affairs. Peter obediently followed her lead, but after a short time she discovered that he gave her his attention only by an effort.

She longed to know what was the matter, for that something had gone wrong with him she was more than ever sure. Two years ago she would have demanded, with the familiarity of long acquaintance, an explanation of any cloud upon his brow, for she and Peter had been as good friends as seventeen and twenty-six may be, when the families of both are united by certain common interests. But somehow nineteen and twenty-eight had not yet recovered quite the old ground of mutual frankness, and Shirley's anxious questions halted upon her lips.

They had another gallop when they came to the smooth stretch, but this time, although Peter said, "That was a good one, was n't it?" his face did not clear.

Just before they reached home, however, he appeared to realise all at once that he must have been poor company, and said so, with a word of regret.

"I don't mind a bit," said Shirley. "One does n't always feel like talking. And I know in your position, you must have a good many cares."

"A few. I 'm afraid I 'm not good at carrying them, since I let myself keep them on my own shoulders, even on horseback. They fell off on the way out, but at the farm they climbed up Grayback's tail again. I 'm sorry, for you 've been jolly company, and I 've honestly enjoyed the ride more than anything that has happened in a year."

"We 'll go again, then, on another half-holiday, and next time we 'll leave Black Care behind altogether. Or, if you will take him along you shall introduce me. Will you?"

Her look was so girlishly sympathetic and inviting, Peter could hardly be blamed for finding a ray of comfort in it, although he only said stoutly:

"That would n't be fair."

"Indeed it would. What are one 's friends for? And Black Care does n't like the society of two."

"That 's true. But he 's not a desirable acquaintance, and I don't mean to introduce him to you. Remember the pothooks — they 'll keep you busy."

He smiled as he said it, but Shirley persisted, more boldly, for she thought she detected the fact that it would be a relief to Peter to tell somebody his troubles, if his conscience would let him.

"I 've seen, ever since I came home, that something was worrying you. It 's made me feel badly. Perhaps just telling would make it easier."

"I should imagine it might. I 'll think about it. Meanwhile, thank you for two fine hours. We 're back just in time for your dinner — and my supper. Will you go to the house door, or dismount here at the stable?"

"Here, please. And next Saturday we 'll go again, if you really care to."

"I shall think about it through the week. Here you are — you don't half let me help you. Success to the pothooks! Good-bye!"

CHAPTER V

BLACK CARE

ON THE following Saturday it rained all day, and no horseback-riding or excursions of any sort were possible. Before another half-holiday had come round, an unusual and severe pressure of work had overtaken Peter, which shut him off from any leisure whatever for many successive weeks. Night after night, all through July and August, he came home late in the evening, too weary for anything but supper and bed. During all this time he saw little of the people in Worthington Square.

As for Shirley, although she thought often of Peter, and was sorry that no chance seemed to favour her getting at the secret of his burdens, whatever they might be, her own work absorbed her. She was proving a ready pupil, keen of intellect and quick of eye and hand. As she advanced in the mastery of stenography, she became more and more fascinated by its details, and spent more and more of her spare hours in practice. The typewriting she acquired

in an unexpectedly short space of time, but her chief ambition was to achieve the ability to take dictation rapidly and accurately, and to this end she laboured with much zeal.

Nancy Bell was taken into confidence, and became an active and interested partner. Many were the hours she spent with Shirley, reading aloud to her from all sorts of books and papers, with a view to accustoming her to any kind of composition.

"You certainly can do anything now," Nancy said, one day in late September, when she had given Shirley an unusually trying test at top speed, and the worker had typewritten it without an error worth mentioning.

"I 'm not so sure." Shirley studied her paper. "I 'm used to you, and you don't flurry me much. But if I should go to father and offer myself for a trial, I 'm afraid I should bungle it."

"But you can't get office practice without office practice. Nothing can take its place or give you confidence, I should think. Why don't you let Murray try you? If he dictates as fast as he talks when he 's discussing business with Peter, he must be hard enough for anybody."

That evening, as Murray and Jane, in the library, were discussing certain household matters, Shirley, sitting at the big table with her note-

book, turned a leaf and began to take down the conversation.

"Did I say that?" Murray asked, toward the close of the conference. "I thought I put it quite differently."

"You said, dear," said Jane, "that it ought to cost that, not that it did."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"I must have been wandering in my mind. I seem to hear myself saying in a tone of great assurance that it actually did cost seventeen dollars. I could n't have said anything else, knowing the facts."

Jane merely smiled, sure of her ground, but not liking to dispute it further. Murray took a turn up and down the room, whistling softly. He himself would not insist upon the thing he was sure he had said, but he was none the less confident. It seemed to bring the discussion to a standstill, as such small differences of statement sometimes will.

Shirley began to read aloud from her note-book a reproduction of the conversation which had just taken place. Listening incredulously, Murray heard himself quoted as saying precisely that which Jane had asserted.

"Look here," said he, coming over to the

table and seizing upon the note-book. "Are you sure you have that straight — that you 're not saying it from memory of what Jane said I said?"

"I did n't get every word you said, but I did get that sentence. You brought out the 'ought' so strenuously I put the exact sign down."

"I 'll give in, of course, but I 'll have to be careful of what I say in your hearing after this. You must be pretty good at it, if you caught all that off our tongues. We were talking fairly fast, if I remember."

"You were very nearly too fast for me — in spots. Conversation 's harder to take than anything else. Do you want to try me on a business letter?"

"With pleasure," and Murray promptly pulled a letter out of his pocket, glanced it over, and began to dictate a reply.

Before she had done two lines, Shirley realised that the actual receiving of dictation from a man of business, who was seriously putting her to a test, was quite different from any amount of practice with Nancy Bell. Murray's keen eyes were upon her, he was watching her fingers as they flew, he was using business terms with which she was not familiar. These technicalities she was forced to omit, but after a little she

steadied under the consciousness that he was speaking not too rapidly, and that he paused now and then between sentences, as if studying the letter he was answering.

At the end she said, "I 'll make you a copy," and flew out of the room. Murray smiled at Jane, who had been an interested witness of the scene.

"I can't get used to the idea that the child is serious in all this," said he. "I know she's been working at it all summer, but I 've seen so little of it, and she 's been so quiet about it, I forget that she means business. If mother and Olive had been at home all this time I should have heard of little else."

"There 's no doubt of her being in earnest. She and Nan have practised by the hour," answered Jane. "I think you 'll find her copy pretty correct."

"I doubt it. She certainly caught the gist of our conversation, but that 's comparatively easy, for her memory would help out on the sort of thing we were saying. But when it comes to getting it word for word, as a business letter must, she 'll find that 's another thing."

Shirley came back presently and handed her brother the letter. He read it through carefully. "By Jove!" he ejaculated, and looked at his sister.

"I had to leave spaces for the words you used that I had never heard," said she. "I did n't think of it before, but there must be a lot of such words in your correspondence. Would you mind making me out a list of them, or giving me a catalogue? Next time I 'll know them."

"I 'll warrant you will. Except for them, you 've practically every word just as I gave it to you. See here, when have you done it? You have n't had time to accomplish so much. It takes at least six months to make a respectable stenographer. You 've been at it but four. Come here and let me look at you. By rights you ought to have grown thin. No, I can't see that you have."

"Of course I have n't. I 've never been so happy in my life."

"Miss Henley, who is in the office, is going to be married in October." He studied her face keenly.

She looked at him with eager eyes. He laughed. "If you were a pauper with a family to support, you could n't look more appealing," he said. "Well, keep pegging away, and I 'll recommend you to father."

Mrs. Harrison Townsend did not come home at all that autumn. Instead, she sailed for

Italy, taking Olive with her. From Europe Mrs. Townsend wrote Murray a letter which he showed to no one, but which gave him no little discomfort of mind.

"I am much better away," she wrote, "where I shall not be in the throes of the revolution which has overtaken my household. With Jane refusing many of her most important invitations, Forrest away, and Shirley casting herself into the business world, like any poor man's daughter, I should be too distressed to be able to play my own part with composure. I hear that Jane is not keeping up her calling list as conscientiously as she should do. Please try to impress her with her duty to our friends, even if she does not care to make them hers. When I return, I shall wish to take up my social life where I left it, and if I should find my friends alienated by the eccentricity of my daughter-in-law, I should feel that a wrong had been done which it would be difficult to overlook."

"About the hardest thing in the world," thought Murray, as he pondered these lines, "seems to be for one woman to get another's point of view. Here 's Jane, staying at home all summer to keep me company, when she might have gone off to the seaside or the mountains with Olive. She 's tackling big problems every day in the manage-

ment of the house, to say nothing of looking after all mother's social correspondence. She 's entertained relatives of ours from in town and from out of town, to say nothing of making father's evenings pleasant and seeing to her own family. Yet because some woman on mother's list writes her that Jane has failed to pay a call within the required limit of time, the poor girl is 'eccentric.' Well, she shall not be taxed with it, if I can help it."

Feeling that Jane, although unconscious of the elder woman's dissatisfaction with her endeavours, should have amends made her after some fashion, Murray arranged to take her with him upon a week's business trip, a flying journey half-way across the continent and back. In the absence of Mrs. Townsend and Olive, this left Shirley and her father quite alone for a week.

One of the evenings of that week Mr. Townsend spent with Joseph Bell — as was now his frequent custom. On this evening Shirley settled down with a book before the library fire. She had been working harder and harder to perfect herself for the position which she had been assured should be hers upon the resignation of Miss Henley, a fortnight hence. And she had at last arrived at that state of confidence in her own powers which permitted an occasional indulgence in an idle evening without a twinge of conscience.

The book proved so entertaining that an hour passed, during which she took no note of time. She could not have told whether it was late or early, when a slight stir in the hall brought her attention to the fact that somebody was there, awaiting her recognition. She looked up to see Peter Bell standing in the doorway, his face so grave and worn that she gave a little cry of amazement.

"Why, Peter!" she said, and came forward to give him her hand. He looked down at her almost as if he did not see her. His hand was cold.

"You 've been out in the wet — you 're chilled," she said, eagerly drawing him toward the fire. "Why, you 're very wet! You did n't have an umbrella."

"I believe I did n't," Peter answered, glancing at his coat-sleeve, which was, indeed, almost dripping with dampness. "I 've been walking a long way — I don't know how far."

He took the big armchair which she offered him, but she stood regarding his moist condition with concern. His visits were too few to make her willing to run the risk of losing this one by suggesting that he ought not to sit down in his wet coat; and after a moment she ran away and came back with a house coat of Murray's.

"Please put this on," she said.

Peter protested that he had no need of taking such precautions, but Shirley persisted until he obeyed her and donned the coat, throwing his own upon a chair, whence she rescued it and hung it where it might have a chance to dry.

"Now rest and be comfortable," said she, drawing her own small chair into a friendly nearness to the big one, "and tell me what's wrong. It needs to be told at once, I know — or I'd try to talk about something else first."

"I'm afraid I could n't talk about anything else first," said Peter. "Yet I don't know that I can talk about this. But — I had to come. There was no one else I could go to. I've stood all the rest by myself, but this ——"

He stopped short, as if he could not go on. Something about his appearance made Shirley's heart begin to beat fast with apprehension. It must be a very bad trouble indeed which could make Peter act so unlike himself, Peter the strong, the self-reliant.

Her mind went back in a flash to the day, weeks before, when he had half promised to give her his confidence in regard to matters which it was evident were bothering him. But he had not looked then in the least like this. It had been merely business care which was heavy on his

shoulders at that time. This was trouble, or she did not know the signs. His set face, upon which her welcome had brought no hint of an answering smile, the lines about his mouth, the suggestion of pallor which was already succeeding to the colour which had been the result of the tramp in the rain, all made her sure of her conclusions.

"I want to hear," began Shirley, very gently, controlling the anxiety in her voice. Then, suddenly, as a startling thought occurred to her, "Peter, it 's not — Murray — or Jane ?— or mother ?"

"No, no," said Peter, quickly, turning to her. "No, it 's not your trouble, it 's mine — ours. Only the others don't know it yet. They must n't know it till it — comes. That 's why I came here. It' s not right to burden you with it, I 'm afraid. But, somehow I ——"

Shirley impulsively put out her hand, as if to touch his. He did not see it, and she withdrew it again. She longed to give him comfort in some way. Yet, until the story was told, she could not tell what to do. If only he would tell it quickly. But, plainly, it was hard to tell.

He drew a deep breath; then sat up straight, staring into the fire.

"There has been a long succession of misfortunes," he began, slowly. "I don't need to

go into those, though I thought them bad enough — until now. Now — if it were nothing worse than those things, if I could just go back to them, I 'd shoulder them all gladly, and not mind. It was property business, all of it — foreclosure of a heavy mortgage threatening Grandfather Bell's farm, loss of the little money father had got together and put into stocks that have gone to pieces — that sort of thing. It was up to me to straighten it all out — and not much to do it with. And father — he seemed not very well — had two or three queer attacks of illness at the factory during the hot weather. I felt I could n't worry him with it. He seemed to be getting old — all at once. Finally, yesterday ——"

Peter paused; then he went on in a lower voice:

"Yesterday he had another of those attacks— much worse than before. A man near him sent for me, and I sent for a doctor. The doctor brought him round, but it took some time. To-day I made him go to another doctor — a specialist. He examined father, and told me what it was."

Shirley, in a breathless silence, waited.

"Any over-exertion, excitement, worry — anything — may end it at any time. If he would give up and stay quietly at home, he might last

a good while. But that 's what he won't do. He knows it all — took it as coolly as if it were nothing at all, but won't give up. And he won't have anybody told. Says they 'd never know another happy moment — and that 's true enough. He 'll just take his chances. It 's brave of him, and I can understand how he feels, but the hard thing for me is — I've got to keep still, and stand by, and — see it come."

With the last word Peter's voice almost broke. He turned his head away. Shirley got up and went to him. She laid one hand on his shoulder, standing still beside him, her heart aching with sympathy, but finding not a word to say. In all his unhappiness, Peter recognised the light touch, and putting up his cold hand grasped the warm one. He held it tight for a minute, for the sense of comradeship and comprehension it brought him gave him courage to go on.

Shirley understood the warm and close relations which had always existed between Peter and his father. And she realised, with a pang, that which Peter had not mentioned, but which must add its share to the poignancy of his apprehension — the fact that with the loss of the head of the family, the burden of the support of that family must fall upon the son's shoulders. Money problems were not to be mentioned in the same

breath with the threatened loss of a dear parent, but the anxiety they were bound to cause would make Peter's trouble immeasurably more serious.

When Peter spoke his voice was steady again.

"Of course I 'm facing nothing harder than other people have to face every day, in one way or another. I mean to stand up to it, like a man, if I can — it would n't be worthy of a chap with a father like mine to be bowled over by what he bears with such courage. But it seemed to me I must tell somebody, and you — something you said weeks ago, when we went riding together, made me sure you would care."

"I do care, very, very much," Shirley answered. "I 've wished ever so many times since then that I knew what was the matter. If you had told me that, it would have been easier for you to come to me with this, I think. I 'm so glad you did. I only wish — oh, how I wish — there were something I could do!"

"You can. You 're doing it now. Just knowing you know makes it easier. If there were anything I could do myself I could bear it better."

She slipped out of the room. In a few minutes she came back, bearing a tray, upon which was a cup of chocolate with a little mound of whipped cream on top, and beside it a plate of sandwiches. She set her tray at Peter's elbow.

"Father is so fond of this, late in the evening, that Cook keeps a double boiler ready on the back of the range, and the rest of us make use of it," she explained. "You may not be hungry, but it will be good for you. Tell me, did you have your supper?"

"No, I have n't been home," he owned. "If a fellow could eat at all, he ought to be able to eat this."

To Shirley's satisfaction Peter consumed every one of the six thin sandwiches, and when she suggested a second cup of chocolate, he gratefully accepted it. He had been famishing, though he had not known it. The interview with the specialist had taken place before lunch time, and Peter had not remembered lunch at all.

Being human, and very weary, creature comforts did their part in strengthening him, in mind as well as body. When he had finished, and had spent another half-hour listening to Shirley's account of news from Forrest, who was in the West Indies now, he rose, a very different young man from the one who had come in out of the rain an hour before.

When he had exchanged the velvet house-coat for the rough tweed one, now dried by the fire, he stood before her, hat in hand. He looked down into her friendly uplifted face and some-

thing very appreciative showed in his own. He could summon only the suggestion of a smile, but his eyes were less heavy, his colour had come back, and resolution was once more in his bearing.

"You would put heart into a craven," he said, shaking hands.

"You 're no craven," answered Shirley, returning the look steadily with her frank eyes, "but one of the stoutest-hearted I ever knew. I know lots more about you than you think, and I know what you have been facing all these years in the way of sticking to work you did n't like."

"That 's nothing. Everybody does that, if he amounts to anything."

"Everybody does n't. But it 's made you strong and brave. You 're brave now — and you 're going to be braver yet."

He studied her a moment in silence. Then the smile she had missed shone briefly out upon her as Peter said fervently: "If I am, it will be thanks to you, my friend. Good night!"

CHAPTER VI

A BREAKDOWN

"NOW make her come!" commanded Marian Hille, as her brother Brant brought his big green motor-car to a stand in front of the great building belonging to Townsend & Company. "Don't let her refuse. How she can spend her days down here, drudging away, I don't see! Brant, tell her I shall simply never forgive her if she does n't shut up that typewriter at once and come along."

"I 'll say what seems to me to suit the situation," declared her brother, sliding out of his seat and divesting himself of his motoring coat. "Whether it will make any impression I 'm not so sure."

He walked leisurely off, but when he was inside the building he made a short trip of it to the fifth floor and the offices. He was quite as anxious as his sister for the success of his errand.

Murray himself welcomed young Hille cordially, and when Brant asked for Shirley, he led his visitor into an inner office. Here Brant stood

still, gazing with interest. He had not yet seen his old acquaintance at her new tasks.

Shirley sat before a typewriting machine, her fingers playing as lightly and swiftly over the keys, for all Brant could see, as those of any veteran at the business. The girl did not look up. Plainly she was much absorbed in her work, a little flush on her cheek, her eyes devouring the "copy" before her in the shape of her note-book, held open by a device above her machine.

Brant turned to look at Murray, and Murray smiled.

"She looks as if she enjoyed it!" Brant exclaimed, under his breath.

"She does. No question of that."

"It 'll wear off, don't you think?"

"I doubt it."

He walked over and stood at her elbow, waiting. Shirley paid him no attention while she finished the long business letter before her, and she would not have turned then if her brother had not said quietly, "A caller is waiting to see you, Miss Townsend."

Then she glanced up, and rose, pulling a glove finger from the forefinger of her right hand before she let the visitor take it. "I still seem to give this finger a bit of extra work," she said smiling.

Brant said a complimentary thing or two in recognition of her businesslike command of the typewriter, and then proceeded to put his case.

As she knew, a November house party was in progress at the Hildreth's country place, eighteen miles out. He and Marian had come in on an errand, and were going back. A particularly jolly evening was in prospect. Somebody had suggested that the Hilles bring Shirley back with them, just for the evening. They felt she owed them that much, after so resolutely declining the original invitation for the entire week. Would she not go? It was a rare evening for early November, the air mild, the moon magnificent, the roads like a floor.

The Hildreths wanted her to stay the night; but Brant would rise with the lark and bring her back to town before breakfast, that she might not miss so much as a semicolon of her day's work. Or — as Shirley continued to look doubtful — he urged that, if she preferred, he would actually get her back to-night. Some of the married people would drive in with them for the sake of the run in the moonlight. Please!

"Go, Shirley, and have a fine time," said her brother.

She was only human — and a girl — after all, and after many weeks of close and serious work

the prospect of the little spin of an hour's duration, with the "jolly evening," appealed to her. Smiling at Brant's last proposition, Shirley yielded.

"I shall have to go to the house first," she said, setting the cover on her machine and putting away her work. The clock already indicated the end of the working-day in the Townsend office.

"Of course. We 'll take you right up in a jiffy." And Brant led the way to the elevator, his soul filled with satisfaction.

The green car was shortly *chug-chugging* in front of the Townsend house, while Shirley ran up to exchange her office clothes for the pretty dull red silk frock which seemed to her to fit the November evening.

A sense of exhilaration took possession of her as she pulled on her long driving-coat, and pinned in place the close hat and swathing gray veil which made her ready for the swift drive in the autumn air. To be really a working girl, and yet not to be shut out from an occasional taste of this sort of pleasure — it was certainly a pleasant combination. And Shirley had accomplished one of the best day's works that she had yet done, and felt as if she had earned whatever of jollity the evening might have in store for her.

"Well, I'm certainly thankful to see you acting like one of us again, if only for a few hours," asserted "Marie Anne," as they whirled away. "Shirley Townsend in a blue serge at four o'clock in the afternoon is an extraordinary sight. Now you look like yourself again. What have you got on? That Indian-red silk? When you like a thing you like it forever, don't you? I wonder how many times you came down to dinner last winter at Miss Cockburn's in that red silk!"

"Don't be brutal, Marian!" called her brother, over his shoulder. "As if it made any difference what she wears as long as she comes with us! Besides, I haven't seen the red silk."

But Shirley was only smiling at Marian's comments on her attire. She had not summered and wintered Miss Hille as a room-mate for two years in the English school not to have become inured to her style of intimate criticism. Besides, she knew perfectly that that Indian-red silk frock had been her friend's envy for the first six weeks of its existence, on account of its beauty and the way it became Shirley's colouring.

It does not take long for a motor-car of high horse-power driven by a young man with the usual dash of daring in his composition to cover eighteen miles of smooth roadway, and it was not yet six o'clock when the car shot up to the

entrance of the Hildreth's country place. Half a dozen young people, returning from the golf links, hurried up to welcome Shirley Townsend back to the ranks of the pleasure-seekers, and she was borne into the house on a little wave of good-fellowship and merriment which she could not help decidedly enjoying.

"It 's a shame to think of that girl throwing herself away on the sort of fad she 's taken up!" growled Somers Hildreth to Brant Hille, as the two came in, after dressing for dinner, to find Shirley Townsend the centre of a gay group before the great fireplace, which was the heart of the country house.

"I wonder what fault Marian had to find with that dress," Brant was thinking, as he caught its gleam in the firelight and saw the sparkling eyes and warm-tinted cheeks above it. "If she is n't by long odds the finest girl in that crowd I 'll go without my dinner." But aloud he responded, calmly, "It does n't seem to have dulled her charms. She never looked more as if she found things worth while, did she?"

"That 's reaction," declared the other young man. "Shut any girl up in a cage, and she 'll stretch her wings when she gets out. It will tell on her after a while, though, if she keeps it up. But she won't. That goes without saying."

"Don't you fool yourself!" muttered Brant, adopting Murray Townsend's view of the matter.

Shirley, indeed, did not look like a girl who was accustomed to adopt courses, only to abandon them when weary. Whatever her views of the "things worth while," she certainly enjoyed that evening. Those who had sent for her congratulated themselves on their foresight.

Without making herself in any way a conspicuous figure, or appearing to take the lead, Shirley's very presence seemed somehow to bring about that result most desirable to a hostess, the making things "go." The young people had been together for five successive evenings, and had about exhausted their resources and those of their entertainers in the way of diversion. But with Shirley Townsend's softly brilliant eyes looking on, her spirited mouth curving into mischief or merriment, her appreciative comments spurring them, the young men of the party at least found themselves stimulated to their best achievement, and exerted themselves to bring the response of her pleasure.

As for the girls, they all liked her, although not without here and there a touch of envy at the success of a style so free from affectation that nobody could accuse its possessor of not being genuine.

"You can't say you 're not having a good time," urged Hille, cornering Shirley as the evening went on.

"There 's no reason why I should want to say it. I 'm having a delightful time."

"I thought it was part of your code, from now on, to enjoy nothing but hard labour."

Her laugh rang out softly.

"You did n't believe anything of the sort. If all work and no play make Jack a dull boy, what would they do to Jill? She would be unendurable."

"She would. But anybody would have taken alarm at sight of you to-day, over your typewriter. You looked as if you were nothing short of carried away with it. You did n't so much as notice I was in the room."

"I 'm not supposed to notice people who come into Murray's office. I learned that at once, by watching Miss Henley. While I 'm there I 'm to be merely an intelligent machine."

"'Machine'" doesn't strike me as exactly the word — in your case. As for the 'intelligence' — I suppose Townsend & Company are very exacting. Do you suppose they 'd take me on the force?"

"You!" It seemed to amuse her very much. Brant looked nettled. He had asked the

question in sport, but he did not like to be taken that way. "Look here, am I such a joke as that?"

"The notion of your working for anybody, even for yourself, is very interesting."

"You think I 'm not capable?"

"I think the mere thought of going to an office every morning at nine o'clock would be too much for you."

"You must have a pretty poor opinion of me."

"Not at all. But you have never needed to work, never expect to need to work, and have never shown the first sign of intending to work. Why shouldn't the idea of your working seem strange?"

"I might have said the same of you a few months ago." Brant was getting red.

"So you might. But I 'm a girl."

"Does my being a man — I'm twenty-four — make it a foregone conclusion that I should roll up my sleeves and tackle a shovel and pick, whether I need the money or not?"

Shirley surveyed him. "No, I don't think it does — *with you*."

The red which had begun to show above Brant's collar now spread toward his ears, extended to his forehead, and finally suffused his entire face. He broke out hotly: "Look

here, you used not to be sharp-tongued like that. If your taking up this sort of thing is going to make you not mind how you cut your friends, it 's my opinion you 'd be better at your embroidery."

Shirley bit her lip with a mischievous desire to say something which would make the angry gleam in his eyes light up still more vividly. She and Brant had played together and quarreled and made up since their nursery days, and this retort, which she would have resented from anybody else, merely delighted her from Brant.

She liked to wake him up, and considered that hurting his feelings on the score of his idleness was both salutary and justifiable. Ever since she had returned she had been feeling more and more annoyed with him for seeming to settle down so unconcernedly to a life of absolute ease and the spending of his share of the estate left him by a father who had toiled a lifetime to get his property together.

But she did not intend to be led into a serious argument with him now and here, nor did she wish to make him like her less on account of her new method of employing her time. She liked him for many good points, and she was rather wiser than most girls in perceiving when she had said enough. So after an instant's

silence, she asked, with a bright glance, disarming because unexpected, "Shall we call it even?"

"Did my shot about the embroidery hit?" Brant exulted.

"Hard. It does n't matter that I don't know how to embroider."

"Not in the least. Yes, I 'll call it even, though I got the worst of it. I was mad enough to bite something a minute ago, but you always did have a way of making a chap double up his fists, and then open them again, feeling foolish. Oh, here comes Mrs. Hildreth. You don't want to go back to-night, do you?"

"I 'll wait till morning. But we must be off early. I would n't miss being on time for a week's salary."

"Before breakfast?"

"Of course — if they 'll let us. We 'll have breakfast at home; the early morning run will make us hungry."

"It certainly will. See here, we don't have to get anybody up to go in with us, do we?"

Shirley looked doubtful. "I 'm afraid we do."

"Then I 'd rather take you in to-night," said Brant, promptly. "We 'll fill up the car with chaperons, and you can sit in front with me. They 'll be tickled to go, in this moonlight. I 'll

ask Mrs. Hildreth and Miss Armitage; they 'll discuss dressmakers all the way in and leave us in peace."

Shirley let him arrange it, personally much preferring to reach home that night and get up at the usual hour in the morning, with an interval between her pleasure-making and her work. The hour was not late, and Brant professed to be able to make incredibly quick time, so he had no difficulty in arranging his party.

There were many sallies at Shirley's expense as her friends saw her depart. Her devotion to business was considered a caprice, likely at any time to give way to more rational behaviour, and she was assured of an enthusiastic welcome back to the company of sane beings when her "craze" should be over. She went away smiling at the thought of how little they understood her, and with a sense of having at hand resources of contentment at which they could not even guess.

With an empty road ahead, and the moonlight making all things clear, Brant sent his car humming. In the rush of air caused by their flight, all four travellers stopped talking, and it was upon a silence hitherto disturbed only by the muffled mechanism of the car that the startling *bang* of an exploding tire woke the echoes.

"Confound the luck!" burst from the young man in the driver's seat, as he brought the machine to a standstill. "That means stop and repair right here. We can't run her in on her rim. We 're not half way."

Shirley looked about her. Ten rods away, its big barns looming against the sky, its white house showing clearly in the moonlight, lay the farm of Mr. Elihu Bell, the grandfather of her friends. Although it was after eleven o'clock, there were lights showing in windows which she knew belonged to the front room of the farm-house.

"Shall you need help?" she asked, as Brant threw open the box which held his repair kit. "The noise has brought somebody to the door over there. It 's the Bell farm — my sister Jane's grandfather, you know."

"Is it? Then we 'll pull over there into the yard, and you people can go inside, since they seem to be up. It may take me quite a while to get out of this scrape. I 'm not much of a mechanic, and I 've been lucky enough not to puncture many tires."

He got in again, and ran the car slowly over to the open gate of the Bell place. As he turned in, the two figures which had been standing in the doorway came out and crossed the yard.

Shirley recognized them both, one tall and slim, with the slight stoop and characteristic walk of age; the other also tall, but broad-shouldered and erect. She wondered what Peter Bell could be doing out here, calling on his grandfather at this late hour, and then remembered that Peter's time was so full by day that he must needs make his visits by night. She thought of the mortgage he had spoken of, and surmised that the visit, prolonged past the hour when farmhouses are usually dark and silent, was on business.

"Well, well!" called the kindly voice of the old man. "Broke down, have you? Anything we can do? Your lights are brighter than any we can furnish you."

Peter came close. "Will the ladies come into the house?" he asked. He could not see who they were.

Mrs. Hildreth and Miss Armitage accepted the offer, for the November air was not so mild as it had been during the day, and they had no great confidence in Brant's ability to repair his own machine.

Peter offered a helping hand. When the older ladies were out, he turned to the girl on the front seat. She sprang down, and stood still before him. She had pulled her gray veil closely about

her face, and she spoke in a muffled whisper: "Guess who I am."

Peter glanced toward Brant, who had now come around into the glare from his own headlights. Peter knew Brant, as anyone must who was included in the entertaining done in the Townsend house. But it had always been many leagues farther to Gay Street from the Hille home on the north side of Worthington Square than from that of Murray and Shirley Townsend on the south side.

"I 'm afraid I can't guess," admitted Peter, who thought he knew that Shirley was at home that night, having noted a light in her window when, at nine o'clock, he had mounted his bicycle to make the trip to Grandfather Bell's. Her figure in the long coat and shrouding veil was not familiar to him, and the whisper had conveyed no note of Shirley's real tones.

"Then you shall never know," the sepulchral whisper assured him, and he found some difficulty in holding his hand from the desire forcibly to remove the provoking veil. The possibility that it was his sister Jane caused him to estimate sharply the height of the figure before him.

It was a little too tall for Jane, and Peter was about to hazard a guess that it was one of the least formidable of the girls of Shirley's set whom

he occasionally met at her home, when Brant Hille called out, annoyance sounding in his voice:

"You 'd better go in with the others, Shirley — this is going to take time. I 've got to put on a new tire — worse luck!"

Peter's fingers grasped the veil and gently pulled it aside from the laughing face beneath. "No wonder you wanted to hide!" he jeered, under his breath. "A working-girl like you, off on midnight larks like this, with to-morrow ahead."

But there was a distinct hint of pleasure in his voice at the discovery of her here, thrown upon his hospitality. He led her away to the house, within whose open door the other ladies had disappeared.

"Grandmother has gone to bed long ago," he said, as they came up on the porch, "and I don't think I 'll disturb her. She 's deaf and won't hear, and she needs her sleep. But I can get you all something hot to drink, and something to eat, too, if there 's much delay."

Shirley presented him to Mrs. Hildreth and Miss Armitage, who were already making themselves at home in the low-ceiled, pleasant living-room which lay all across the front of the farm-house. A dying fire reddened the hearth, which

Peter soon revived into a blaze. Then he went in search of refreshments. Thereafter, returning to the scene of the breakdown, he rendered Brant valuable assistance, proving handier at the process of replacing the injured tire than Brant himself. When they finally had done the work, and Brant pulled out his watch with a hand black with dirt and grease, he gave an exclamation of dismay.

"One A. M., by all that 's unfortunate! Better let me take you back to Longacre, Shirley, and get you home comfortably in the morning. What difference does it make if you do miss part of a day?"

"Leave her here," said Mr. Elihu Bell. "We 'll take care of her to-night, and I 'll drive in with her in the morning, bright and early. That 's the best way out, and you people can go back and go to bed. Grandma 'll be mightily pleased to wake up in the morning and find the little girl here."

Feeling it the simplest solution of a situation which was involving somebody's sacrifice, whatever she did, Shirley accepted the offer. Brant did not feel altogether pleased over driving away and leaving her standing on the porch beside Peter, but he was decidedly weary with his exercise, and sleepy after two brimming glasses of milk, and he resigned his charge with one mur-

mured speeech: "Shows what a fool thing it is for a girl like you to play at holding down a business position. You can't be either one thing or the other with any comfort, and it even gets your friends into trouble."

This surly farewell was punished by the girl's gay rejoinder:

"I suppose it was the weight of your cares that was too much for the car! I 'm sorry, and I 'll promise not to run away from my work again — with you."

When the car was off, Peter promptly brought round his bicycle. "This is n't quite so imposing a conveyance as Hille's automobile," he said, standing at the foot of the steps and looking up at Shirley, "and I can't invite anybody to share it with me and ride home. But it 's very convenient for these little runs out to the farm, and I 'm glad I happened to be here to-night. Somehow, just the sight of you, without any chance to talk, does me good."

"If that is true, I should think you might take advantage of living so near just a bit oftener than you do. Do you know how long it is since you 've been over?"

"It seems six months to me," said Peter, smiling.

"It is six weeks. Are you so busy all your evenings?"

"Pretty busy. And I spend what little spare time I can make with father."

"Of course," she agreed, gently. "But I think you need a little more change of scene than you get."

"I 'd like it. But I can't be bothering a girl like you with entertaining an old chap like me."

"'An old chap!'" mused Shirley. "Is that the way you feel?"

"I was feeling forty, at least — till the tire blew up. Then I came down to thirty. When I found the girl under the veil, I dropped off several years more. But when I looked at that boy Hille I became a patriarch again."

"I wish he could hear you call him a boy! Suppose I give you a special invitation, and run the risk of your bothering me, will you accept it?"

"In a hurry!"

"Your first spare evening then?"

"You tempt me to cut everything and come to-morrow night. No — I 'll wait a decent interval, to let you get caught up after this midnight dissipation. May I come early?"

"The earlier the better."

"And you won't invite anybody else to help make it jolly for me? The last time I ventured over you had a roomful."

"I 'll invite nobody. Come, Peter Bell — do you know I 'm being much nicer to you than I ordinarily am to anybody? I let mother and Olive do the inviting, and I just look demure, as if I did n't care."

"You do care, then, this time?

"It 's time you were off, is n't it?" and she retreated, laughing, to the open door.

Peter looked back at her, an alluring figure, with the lamplight falling over the dull red silk of her frock, and wished he need not go at all. But Grandfather Bell's tall form appeared just behind Shirley's. This was an unheard-of hour for Grandfather Bell. So, with a friendly good night and a warm feeling at his heart, Peter bestrode his wheel and was off down the moonlit road toward home.

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTMAS GREENS

JANE, I've the most charming plan in my head for Christmas week you ever heard of."

"Have you, Shirley dear? And are you going to tell it to me?"

"I am, indeed. Listen. Let's take cook and Norah, and go — all of us, your houseful and ours — and spend part of holiday week at Grasslands."

"Shirley! You take my breath away! Could we do it? Would n't it be fun if we could?"

"I don't see a thing in the way. When I stayed overnight, in November, your Grandmother Bell said she wished she could get her family together once more at Christmas there, instead of going in to have dinner in Gay Street, as they 've been doing since your family went to live in town. She said she 'd like to have us all if she were younger again, but she has no 'help,' and thought it would be a pity to ask us, and then have your mother and Nan do the work. I 've thought about it ever so many

times since, but this idea has only just popped into my head."

"I should think it could be done," mused Jane. "There are rooms and rooms at the farm, and little open wood-stoves in every one. You and I could go out the day before, and get everything aired and ready."

"What if you and Mrs. Bell and Nan and I went, without telling any of the men? I 'm to have Christmas week for my first vacation, you know. Then when they came home in the evening, have a bouncing big sleigh ready to carry them off to the farm, and a jolly supper waiting? Then a tree that night, and Christmas next day, with coasting and skating and snowballing, if the weather is right?"

"You artful child!" exclaimed Jane. "It would do us all heaps of good — especially father and mother. Father looks to me so worn and tired. Have you noticed it?"

Shirley nodded. She had indeed noticed it, and a deep-laid plot, having for its beneficiary Mr. Joseph Bell, was at the back of the planning. But she did not intend that anybody should find that out. So she agreed lightly that Jane's father needed a holiday, as did all the others.

"If we can't get any of them to take more than Christmas day, we can at least bring them out

there every night and back every morning," she said. "We 'll give them such good things to eat they won't mind the drive. With Grandfather Bell's big horses, all jingly with sleigh-bells, they certainly won't. Oh, will you go and speak to Cook now? I simply can't wait to get things under way."

"Do you mean to surprise Grandmother Bell, too?"

"Yes, if your grandfather agrees, as I 'm sure he will. If we told her she 'd tire herself all out, doing wholly unnecessary things. Everything in the house is always in apple-pie order, but she would n't think so."

"You 're quite right, I think. I 'll go and talk with Cook"—and Jane hurried away, looking as girlishly eager as Shirley herself.

She had small doubt of Cook. If Mrs. Murray Townsend had a friend in the house, it was Bridget. Mrs. Harrison Townsend had never considered Bridget a particularly amiable person, but Jane had won her completely by treating her always with consideration, and by showing the interest in her affairs, which is appreciated most by those who expect it least.

"Sure, then, we 'll go, Mrs. Murray, and take it as a holiday," agreed Cook, when her young mistress had explained her plans. "And we 'll

take some of the fixin's with us they 'll not be havin' at the farm."

During the week that intervened before Christmas, Shirley's head was so full of her schemes that for the first time since her initiation into office work she had considerable difficulty in keeping her mind upon her tasks. Christmas fell upon a Tuesday that year, fortunately for her plans, so after Saturday noon she was free to give her mind to the pleasures in prospect. Mrs. Bell and Nancy had agreed enthusiastically to every detail of the arrangements, and Grandfather Bell, when cautiously consulted over the telephone and urged to keep it all a secret from his wife, had responded as joyously as a boy that the party might occupy every nook and corner of the house and have things all their own way, if they would only come.

It proved necessary to let somebody into the plan at the last, in order that the men, returning to their homes on Monday evening, should be directed what to do. Rufus was selected for this office, an appointment which tickled him so that it was with difficulty he kept from bursting out with his secret. At night he was first at home, and as the others one by one arrived, he haled them to their rooms, bade them make themselves ready in short order, and surreptitiously packed away

several travelling bags in the recesses of Grandfather Bell's capacious market-wagon, now on runners and fitted with seats.

"What on earth does it all mean?" asked Murray, taking his seat in the sleigh in which the energetic Rufus had stowed the male members of his own family, amidst a storm of questions and surmises, accompanied by much good humoured raillery at his own quite evident excitement.

"It means that you 're kidnapped, and may never see home again," responded Rufus, tucking a hot soapstone under his father's feet, for the night was sharp, and Shirley's orders imperative. "Warm, daddy? Want an extra rug over you? I 've enough here to wrap up a party of elephants."

"I 'm very comfortable," Mr. Bell replied. His shoulder rested against Peter's, and Peter's arm lay along the low back of the seat behind him. Mr. Bell always felt a comfortable sense of support and protection when Peter was near — and Peter generally was near in these days. The elder man well understood why, and appreciated the devotion which showed itself in acts rather than in words.

"I 've only one objection to make," declared Ross, as the sleigh moved briskly off, driven by Grandfather Bell's next neighbour, a man who did odd jobs for him when needed, and worked

for him steadily during the summers. "I 'm hungry as a bear, and don't want to go more than fifty miles to supper."

"It would pay you to go a hundred, judging by my observations," asserted Rufus, from among the fur robes at Ross's feet. "And we 'll be there in a jiffy. Don't these boys go, though? They must get fed plenty of oats."

"They certainly do," agreed the driver. "Elihu Bell is n't the man to starve his horses, let alone humans."

"That's encouraging," and Murray, who also boasted a vigorous appetite, fell to conjecturing, after the manner of hungry man, what supper at the farm would be like. He knew nothing of the arrangements that had been made, and felt rather doubtful whether anything could take the place of the dinner of Jane's planning he had expected to find at home.

The ten miles were covered in a little more than an hour, for the sleighing was good, and the driver anxious to show what his horses could do. As they turned in at the gate and drew up at the side porch, they saw that the old house was aglow from top to bottom with lights in every window. At the jingle of their bells the door flew hospitably open, although no one was in sight, and only the roaring fire in the wide fireplace

opposite the door seemed on hand to give them a welcome.

"It looks Christmas-sy enough in there, does n't it?" said Ross, catching sight of holly branches and ropes of ground-pine adorning the chimney-piece, and holly wreaths tied with scarlet ribbons in the windows.

"Well, well!" ejaculated Mr. Joseph Bell, slowly, as Peter gently pushed him ahead into the room, and his eyes fell upon a tree, its top touching the low ceiling, its branches twinkling with candles and loaded with packages. He blinked with astonishment, and sat abruptly down in the first chair that offered, looking as pleased as a boy.

"Where are they all?" and Rufus, putting his hands to his mouth, gave a ringing hail.

"Merry Christmas!" responded a chorus of gay voices, and a curtain fell aside. Grandmother Bell, her rosy old face beaming, advanced with outstretched hand, her husband close behind her. In the background appeared Mrs. Joseph Bell, Jane, Shirley and Nancy, all in white dresses, with holly berries gleaming in their hair.

"This is the best surprise ever heard of!" cried Peter, stooping to kiss Grandmother Bell's soft, wrinkled cheek, and then turning to wring his grandfather's hand. "This beats Christmas in town all to nothing."

"It *is* jolly!" and Murray saluted the old lady in his turn, for he was a favourite with her, not only because he was Jane's husband, but because, from the first, he had taken pains to be very good to her. He smiled at Jane as he stood straight again, thinking she had never looked prettier than she did to-night. But Murray was apt to think that, wherever he first caught sight of her after a day's absence.

"I 've been trying all day," said Ross, as he greeted the old people, "to make myself realise this was Christmas eve. But from this hour all difficulty leaves me. I smell Christmas in the air."

"It 's the pumpkin pies, and mince, and doughnuts, and plum pudding you smell," laughed Nancy.

"The greens smell sweet and Christmas-sy, too," said Shirley. "We had such fun gathering them this morning. It seemed a pity to do it by ourselves."

"If I 'd known of it, I should have blown out through the factory roof and landed over in grandfather's woods!" declared Peter, coming up to shake hands. "Woods in winter! And to-morrow's a holiday! Are we to stay? I thought I fell over a grip as I got out of the sleigh."

"Indeed you are — for four days."

"Four days! I only wish I could!"

"You can — evenings and nights and mornings."

"Do you mean it? Are we invited?"

"We are."

"Who thought this magnificent scheme up?" demanded Peter. "Ah, you 're blushing! I might have ——"

"I 've been out in the cold air more than half the day," and Shirley covered one brilliant cheek with her hand. "Are n't you hungry?"

"Famishing!"

"We 're to have supper right away. Your grandmother calls it supper, and Cook calls it dinner."

"Cook!"

"She 's here."

"Well, of all the ——"

But Peter had to be hurried away by his sister Nancy to his room — his old room upstairs under the eaves, where he found his hand-bag awaiting him, and a brisk fire snapping in the old box stove. For the time being, he felt he could let himself forget that the old roof was encumbered by a heavy mortgage, due in six weeks now, and held by a man who had long coveted that farm. It was Christmas.

The meal spread in the long, low dining-room, to which a merry company presently sat down, was a delicious one. Grandmother Bell's old blue-and-white Canton plates and cups had never been more delectably filled, nor had her antique silver forks and spoons clinked to a livelier measure than the talk and laughter which went round as the supper proceeded.

"Does it seem like home here?" Shirley asked Mr. Joseph Bell.

"Home?" said he, with a glance from the old prints upon the walls to the antique side table below, with its turned-up leaf. "It 's the only place in the world that will ever really seem like home to me. It 's just a makeshift, living in the city, to people who were brought up on a place like this. You see, though I went away from here when I was a young man, and lived a long time in the city, working up in the paper factory, we came back here again and stayed five years, while the children were little, on account of a breakdown in my health. Then when I grew strong again, we moved back and settled in Gay Street. But the farm is home — always will be. My wife feels the same way, though she was a city girl. She 'd like to live here now as much as ever."

"I don't wonder. It 's one of the pleasantest

farm-houses I ever saw." And Shirley smiled across the table at Peter as she spoke, meeting his eyes as he glanced from his father's face to hers, well pleased to see the elder man looking as if heartily enjoying himself.

"The tree is only to look at this evening," announced Jane, when they were all back in the living-room. "Nothing is to be taken off it till to-morrow evening."

"And we 're to be tantalised all that while? I 'm willing to see it shorn of its fruit any time after I 've made a quick trip to town — which will be the first thing to-morrow morning," said Murray, with a meaning wink at Peter, who nodded, comprehending.

Rufus grinned at his father, and a general spirit of understanding appeared to prevail among the guests, who had been brought away to the party without a chance to get together the parcels they had stowed in sundry secret places.

"We 're glad you 're so clever at seeing our reasons for delay," said Nancy, gazing up into the thick branches of the tree, her eye upon various packages of her own, all tied in the same way, so that they were easily recognisable. She had worked for months over her gifts, having little money to spend, but possessing much love and ten skilful fingers.

"Meanwhile we must have something doing this evening," said Rufus. "What shall it be?"

"How will making candy suit your zest for sport?" asked Jane.

"Bully! We have n't made candy since we grew up — not real candy. I don't count Nan's caramels and Shirley's fudge. Let 's make some real old-fashioned molasses candy, and *pull* it!"

"What else, at the old farm? As soon as the kitchen is clear we 'll go out," and Jane disappeared, to hasten operations in the kitchen by tying on an apron and wiping dishes herself with Norah. Her blithe talk, while her fingers flew, kept both Cook and Norah smiling while they worked, and the big farm-house kitchen was soon in spotless order.

"It does be after doin' me good to work in a place like this again," declared Cook, as she helped Jane measure out molasses and get the big kettle on. "It 's not that I don't like the tiles and the copper and all the conveniences of my kitchen in the city. But when a person has been brought up in the country, there 's always the fondness clingin' to them for the old ways, even if they 're a bit inconvenient. See the gourd dipper, now, Norah. Will you say that water does n't taste better out of it than from granite ware?"

"I never saw a dipper like this before," answered Norah, who had been born in town, and could hardly share Cook's enthusiasm for these details of country living.

"*She* knows what I mean," said Cook, with a nod of the head after her young mistress, just departing. "Sure, I have n't seen such a sparkle in the eyes of her since she came to live at the house. She 's not born to be a great lady, just a home-keeping one. And that 's the best sort, to my mind."

Then she beckoned Norah away, and they fled up the back stairs, just as the sounds of approaching feet warned them that the company were coming.

"Jolly! This is the stuff!" exulted Rufus, bursting first into the kitchen. "Does n't that smell like the real thing? Tie an apron on me and let me take charge of the kettle. The rest of you can grease tins. I 'll offer a prize for the whitest candy. Secure your partners for the pulling!"

"May I have the honour?" and Peter made his best bow to Shirley as she appeared from the pantry, her hands full of shining tins.

"Of course you may, if you 'll show me how. I never pulled candy in my life."

"Your education has been appallingly insuffi-

cient, in spite of those two years in England. But I used to be pretty good at it, and we 'll take the prize if you follow directions. Please begin by taking off those rings!" commanded Peter.

Shirley obediently slipped off several pretty rings. Then she tied on a small and frivolous apron, at which Peter frowned.

"Do you call that absurdity of lace and ribbons an apron?" he demanded. "What do you suppose will happen to it if you drop a hunk of candy in the sticky stage on it? Here, I 'll get you one of grandma's — they 're worth something." Shirley presently found herself invested in a bountifully made apron of checked white material, with a bib and strings, which nearly covered her from sight. "Now you 're safe — and so is the candy. The minute it 's fairly cool, we 'll seize a generous portion and get away to some cool spot with it."

It was some time before this stage in the operations was reached, and meanwhile Peter found himself obliged to share his partner with Ross and Rufus, who had no idea of allowing monopolies, with no other girls present but Nancy.

The elder people, however, proved themselves nearly as good company as the younger ones, for everybody seemed to have adopted the spirit of the season and to be ready for as much fun-

making as possible. And to the great satisfaction of both Peter and Shirley, not the least care-free of the company seemed Mr. Joseph Bell himself.

To Peter, especially, watching his father with an eye which took note, as the others could not, the very evident relaxation and refreshment of the occasion were a source of deep satisfaction. For once the son felt that he could himself relax and dare to get out of the hour all the joy there was in it. Happiness of this sort could not hurt, he was sure. It could only help.

"Our panful is cool enough!" declared Peter, flourishing the blue-and-white-checked gingham apron which veiled his long legs, as he returned from the porch, where the candy had been cooling. "Now, partner, hands buttered, courage good? Stand ready to take hold when I say the word. I 'll work the lump into malleable condition. Open the door into the wood-shed, please. We 'll do our pulling there, if it 's not too cool for you; then we 'll not get stuck."

"*Ooh-h-h!*" Shirley gave a little shriek as Peter presently, with a deft pull of his big lump into a long, smooth skein, handed her one end with the injunction to draw it out quickly and swing it back to him. "But it 's hot!"

"Of course it is, Miss Tender-Fingers! If we let it get comfortably cool we could n't pull

it at all. Keep hold — keep it moving. Don't let it stay in your fingers long enough to stick. Pull — swing—pull — swing! Hold on! You're getting stuck! Wait a minute!"

"I can't do anything but wait!" gasped Shirley, holding up ten fingers hopelessly embedded in a mass of uncomfortably warm material.

"What! Can this be the expert stenographer, all balled up in a couple of quarts of molasses? Hold still! Don't try to work out. I'll pull you loose. Don't let the others see. Keep away from that kitchen door!"'

But Rufus, pulling smoothly away from Jane, with the art acquired by much practice in past years, spied out the tangled ones. His shout of laughter brought all the others toward the wood-shed door.

Shirley and Peter were obliged to return to the kitchen to obtain butter for the stuck-up fingers. They fell into a state of great merriment over the situation, in which everybody else joined appreciatively, and the old kitchen rafters rang with the laughter.

"Where would the stage apron be now? This is no gallery play!" jeered Peter, rescuing one long string of brownish-yellow sweetness from the front of Shirley's big white apron. "Want a taste? Shut your eyes and open your mouth!"

"No, thank you. Eat it yourself."

"I will," and Peter tipped back his head.

At this interesting moment the door between dining-room and kitchen swung open. A figure appeared upon the threshold — a figure clad in silk and furs, topped by a Parisian bonnet. Over its shoulder showed the heads of two others — one wearing a wonderful hat covered with fine black ostrich-plumes, the other its own thin thatch of short, iron-gray hair.

"We have found you at last!" said the voice of Mrs. Harrison Townsend.

Behind her, Olive burst into a musical peal of laughter.

"Look at Shirley, mother! Don't you think it 's about time we came home to prevent her quite returning to childhood?"

Then Mr. Harrison Townsend, from the background:—"This is rather stealing a march on you, good friends. But we found our own house dark — and this is Christmas eve!"

CHAPTER VIII

PETER READS RHYMES

"STAY? Of course you 'll stay!" declared Grandfather Bell to Mr. and Mrs. Townsend. "It 'll do you good after all your junketing, and we'll be mightily pleased to have you."

It had not taken much persuasion. There certainly was a charm pervading the old farmhouse, and the thought of resting quietly there for a few days appealed to Mrs. Townsend. Her husband was delighted at the plan, for he had been persuaded to join his wife abroad, and several months of European travel had wearied him. Everything simple and homelike attracted him now more than ever. It had been his restlessness which had brought his party home a month before the date originally set for their return.

If there had been a goodly number of packages upon the Christmas tree on Christmas eve, there were more than double that number by the evening of Christmas day. Not only had Murray and Peter made an excursion to town,

but Mrs. Townsend, mindful of many intended gifts stored away in her trunks, had sent Olive in with the others to get them.

When the Christmas dinner was over, Rufus proposed that the clan go out for an hour's skating on a pond not far away. "We can enjoy that tree a lot better if we have some good brisk exercise beforehand," he asserted.

"I don't skate," said Olive, looking as if she wished she did.

"Come along with us just the same," urged Ross, "and we 'll take turns, not exactly 'sitting out' with you, but walking up and down the shore. Or — we 'll teach you."

Olive declined to be taught, but agreed to accompany the others. Promenading along the bank, fur-wrapped, her dark beauty made brilliant by the frosty air which nipped her cheeks, she was a figure to compel attention. She had never seemed more companionable than now, and both Ross and Rufus enjoyed, with more zest than they had anticipated, the period allotted to them for bearing her company. Murray, observing her with brotherly penetration, found her decidedly improved, and wondered what had happened during the months of her absence to make her so much more appreciative of her family's society than she had been wont to be.

When Peter, in his turn, came to offer himself as partner in her exile from the gaieties going on upon the ice, she greeted him with a smile so radiant that he looked at her in wonder. The old friendship between the two, begun in the earlier days of their acquaintance, and carried on through several years, while they grew from boy and girl to man and woman, had waned and nearly died of neglect on both sides during the past two years. Each had become absorbed in pursuits so different that they had little in common, and Olive, especially, had seemed to outgrow the traits of frankness and friendliness which had made Peter like her in spite of many obvious faults. Before she went away, he had come to think of her as hopelessly spoiled and artificial. But now — had something changed her point of view?

"A few years ago," said Olive, as the two paced up and down, exchanging comments on the occurrences of the past months, "I was in a hurry to be grown up. When I look at Jane and Shirley and Nancy, after having been away from them for six months, I realise that their genius for remaining girls is going to be an advantage. What a trio they are! Should n't you say they were all three about sixteen?"

The three had just joined hands and skated

away from Murray, Ross, and Rufus, who had promptly started in pursuit. All three wore skirts of ankle length, short jackets and close little caps, and none had considered furs a necessary article of apparel for lively exercise. A blue silk scarf about Jane's throat and a scarlet one floating to the breeze from Shirley's furnished notes of colour to the agile, dark-clad figures, and three health-tinted, winsome faces looked up at the two on the bank with a gay greeting as the trio swung lightly by.

"I certainly should," agreed Peter. "I don't think Jane will ever grow old. Nan is an infant, and will be for ten years yet, as far as settling down to consider herself too old for pranks like that, and I 'm glad of it. As for your sister Shirley ——"

"Tell me what you think of Shirley. The child is a continual puzzle to me; I can't make her out. This idea of working steadily at earning a salary in the office seems to be a fixed one, though I had supposed it only a freak. Does she look as contented as this all the time, or is it just the relaxation of the holiday?"

"I should say it was a permanent condition of mind. She 's more interested to-day in her work than when she began, and is growing surprisingly expert. Murray told me yesterday

she wants to tackle the special foreign correspondence — French, you know. That means a lot of extra labour."

Peter spoke as if he felt a personal pride in Shirley's achievements, an attitude which Shirley's sister was quick to note.

"I felt out of patience with you when she began, for I thought her zeal for making a working-girl of herself might be of your inspiring," said Olive, with a quick look at him.

"Not a bit of it. I never heard of it till she had been a week at her first studies. How should I have dared suggest such a course?"

"You and she seem to be great friends."

"Do we? It is an honour I appreciate very much," answered Peter, with a little touch of courtliness in his manner such as had often surprised her in the early days of their acquaintance, and which struck her now as decidedly interesting in a young man who spent his days in a factory, even if he was many degrees higher in position in that factory than when she had first known him. What his position was at present she did not guess, nor did she know that Murray had begun to look at him as a man to be desired in his own business, a man whose brain was undoubtedly to make him an important factor wherever he might be.

What she did recognise was that she had met few men anywhere who had the power to command her interest as Peter had always done, and seemed now more capable of doing than ever before. As for his looks — she owned to herself that she had never before realised quite how fine and resolute and altogether manly was his whole personality.

"Speaking of contentment," said Peter, breaking the little silence which had followed upon his last words, "don't you think it follows rather naturally upon feeling that you are accomplishing something worth the doing? It does n't make so much difference what it is; the point is, that you 're doing it. If it costs effort, so much the better."

"It depends on what you think is worth the doing," said Olive. "You and I would be apt to differ on that — as Shirley and I do."

"Not much question of that," admitted Peter, smiling. He gave her one of his clear-sighted glances, under which she shrank a little though she did not show it. It made her say, rather defiantly:

"Of course you think, as you always did, that I 'm the most useless creature living, and that my ideals are about as insignificant as the amount of actual work I do."

Their eyes met, hers black and sparkling, his gray and steady and cool. He studied her for an instant, with a quality in his intent scrutiny before which her eyes went down. She was used to admiration in men's observation of her, and though that element could hardly be lacking in Peter's, since he was human, and she a more than ordinarily charming young woman, there was also in his regard that appearance of taking her measure, which, quite unconsciously, he could never help exercising when brought into contact with men or women. But his words, when they came, were gentle.

"If you don't mind my saying so, I think you 're capable of things so well worth while that your life might be a wonderful thing to you. You could, if you cared to, do what you pleased with almost anybody. You have the art, the magnetism — whatever it may be — of the born leader. The only trouble is — you don't much mind — do you?— which way you lead."

This from Peter Bell! For a minute Olive was left speechless. Yet it was impossible to resent his frank putting of the case, for it conveyed something which gave her a distinct pleasure.

"I 'm not sure whether I ought to be angry with you or not," she said, after a minute.

"Please don't be."

"When did you take up the profession of preacher?"

"To the queen?" suggested Peter, with an odd smile. "But you 're at liberty to order my head off at any minute, you know. Or to preach back — which would be worse."

In spite of this passage-at-arms, they were both laughing when the others came up with the announcement that it was time to go back to the house. But Peter's keen speech sank in; Olive did not forget it soon. And somehow, she was more than ever sure that Peter himself was well worth cultivating.

"I never was so excited over a Christmas tree as over this one," confided Nancy to Shirley, as the two dressed for the evening. The Christmas dinner had taken place, after the country fashion, in the middle of the afternoon. It was now six o'clock, and the evening was before them. No supper was in order, after the tremendous banquet at three o'clock; but Jane had provided certain light refreshments of the decorative sort; salad and sandwiches, gay-coloured ices and bonbons, cakes and a great bowl of fruit punch, all of which waited in a cool spot ready for the serving by the young people themselves. Cook and Norah had been sent into town, for a celebration of their own with friends.

"Oh, oh! What a pretty frock!" cried Nancy, as her friend shook out a soft silken fabric of pale gray, lighted up here and there with small sprigs of scarlet flowers, with belt and long streamers of scarlet velvet to match.

"Do you like it? It 's my one French gown, and an inexpensive one, too, but it looks festal, and I thought I 'd christen it to-night. Will you wear the one I have for you? I meant to put it on the tree, but it occurred to me you might like to wear it and keep me company," and Shirley pulled a long box from under the valance of the high "four-poster" bed.

"You are the dearest thing that ever lived!" cried Nancy, going down on her knees before the box, and lifting out the frock of pale blue veiling, with its trimmings of flowered ribbon, a girlish creation of the sort to please young eyes.

It was a very happy pair of maids who descended the staircase together. They were happy, however, in two quite different ways. Nancy's cup was overflowing in the delight of her pretty finery; but it was a joy of another sort which made Shirley's heart beat high. Under the folds of gray with the scarlet flowers a small envelope lay hidden, over the contents of which the girl had spent an anxious hour.

There has not been room to tell of it in this

brief chronicle, but for the last month Shirley had been having consultations with Murray over an important subject — the matter of an investment she wished to make. She owned not a small amount of property, in stocks and bonds, an inheritance from her grandfather, the management of which had been put into her hands by her father as a matter of education. Within a few weeks a chance for profitable investment of a portion of this holding had appealed to her, and after a spirited argument with her brother, she had received his sanction in the course she was eager to adopt.

The legal part of the transaction had been completed two days before Christmas, and since then Shirley had been greatly occupied in spare moments with the composition of something which might seem to have small connection with so prosaic a subject as the transfer of certain legal documents from one pair of hands to another. She was not yet satisfied with the result of her endeavours, being no poet, but the best burlesque production of which she had been capable had been carefully copied on her typewriter, and was now reposing where its presence considerably quickened the heart-beats under the scarlet flowers.

At a moment when she was alone in the room

Shirley slipped round behind the tree, and extracting the envelope from its agitating position, quickly, although with fingers which mixed themselves up a little, tied it in an obscure place beneath a bough, where a gay golden ball nearly hid it from view.

"Come out! Come out!" commanded Rufus, as, arriving upon the scene, he spied her. "Absolutely not a feather's weight more allowed on that tree. There never was a tree so bowed down with care as that one. Nor another small boy so impatient to begin as this one. I caught sight of my name on that package six feet long under there, and I 've been delirious with suspense ever since."

"As soon as Santa Claus arrives," promised Jane, who had agreed with Shirley that no accompaniment of the traditional Christmas should be lacking, although there were no small children present to be edified by the sight of the patron saint. Older people, as she well knew, frequently enjoy a return to childish means of entertainment, and when Santa Claus, in full rig, walked into the room, she was not surprised to see the looks of greatest pleasure upon the faces of Grandfather and Grandmother Bell.

Peter made a capital Santa Claus, treating them all as children, and making speeches as he

presented the gifts which brought forth peals of merriment. The gifts themselves were many and varied, from the mittens knit by Grandmother Bell's skilful fingers, to the silken scarfs and fans and foreign photographs which were the contributions of the travelled Townsends.

"Skees!" cried Rufus, going into contortions of ecstasy over Murray's present, and clumping up and down the room on the unwieldy articles. "Won't I get out to-morrow night on that hill back of the pond!"

"Such beautiful lace I never saw," said Mrs. Joseph Bell to Mrs. Townsend, her fingers caressing the exquisite tracery of the pattern lying in her lap, which had come to her "with the love of Eleanor Forrest Townsend."

"I thought it looked like you," returned Mrs. Townsend, who was looking very much pleased herself over a handkerchief wrought by Nancy's clever art. The others were busy over their gifts; it was a pandemonium of exclamations and congratulations, expressions of gratitude and observations of wonder and delight. Shirley, her lap full of parcels, tissue-paper, ribbons, and cards of presentation, talking and exclaiming with the rest, was yet keeping her eye on Santa Claus, as he stripped the tree. She was watching for the moment when he should find that envelope.

When it came, she meant to be out of the room and away.

Meanwhile Santa Claus dropped a fresh package into her lap. She recognised the saint's own handwriting on the wrapper — a bolder, firmer hand than one would have expected from a gentleman with so long and snowy a beard. She opened it with strong anticipation, and found within a set of note-books of special style and quality, evidently made to order, for the binding was of a beautiful texture of leather, and the paper within of the best known to trade — the thin India, used only for fine work. Her name, delicately stenciled on the covers, completed a gift which appealed to the girl with a sense of the thought and care put into its make-up. She looked up, to find Santa Claus's eyes watching her from behind the tree, his lips smiling beneath the white beard, for her surprise and pleasure were plainly to be read upon her face. She nodded at him, colouring rosily — a picture, in her gray and scarlet frock, as she sat upon the floor surrounded by her gifts, the sight of which was quite sufficient to reward any giver.

Almost everything was off the tree. "Hello, here 's something I nearly missed!" murmured Santa Claus, catching sight of the corner of the white envelope beneath the golden ball. Shirley

looked up quickly, saw him struggling with the red ribbon which tied the envelope in place, and rose to her feet, letting a lapful of miscellaneous articles slide to the floor.

Everybody was busy, and only Mrs. Bell noticed, and said, gently, "Look out, dear, you 're dropping things." But Shirley was gone, through the crowd of people and packages, to the door, and had closed it softly behind her.

Peter had already had a gift from Shirley, a little thing. She was not the girl to present any man with a keepsake more valuable than the small book of modern verse which had in it certain stirring lines that she knew would be a stimulus to him. So when he saw his own name in typewriting upon the envelope, he opened it without much consideration, thinking it a joke of Ross's or Rufus's. But a second envelope was fitted inside the first, and it was labeled, "Please don't read this in public."

His curiosity was awakened now, and slipping the communication into his pocket, he summarily finished his duties by distributing the few remaining parcels without comment, and then walked away out of the room. It had occurred to him that that note-paper was of a sort that he had seen once or twice before, when Shirley had had occasion to send him a note of invitation.

Outside in the hall, which was dimly lighted by an oil side-lamp screwed to the wall, Peter opened his inner envelope. Still in typewritten characters was a set of rhymes, cast in a popular fashion used by makers of humorous doggerel. His eye ran over them hurriedly, with a low ejaculation of astonishment and incredulity at the end; then he read them again more intently, looking as if he could not believe the evidence of his eyes. They ran thus:

A farm owned by people named Bell
Was a place where a Thorn would fain dwell.
So he bought up a mortgage,
Intending to war wage
On the property-owners named Bell.

Now one of the Bells, christened Peter,
Thought life would be fuller and sweeter
If the farm could be shorn
Of this sharp-pricking Thorn,
For he feared a foreclosure, did Peter.

A designing young person called Townsend
Was seeking investment (cash down), and
She purchased the mortgage.
She never will war wage,
She'll never foreclose, will S. Townsend.

Peter had noticed, if nobody else had, when Shirley went out of the room. He now understood her sudden disappearance. He made a quick trip through the lower part of the house, paper in hand, his questioning gaze penetrating

every corner. She was not in the sitting-room, or the dining-room, or the kitchen — at least he thought she was not, although he even looked into the wood-shed. As he was returning through the kitchen, an expression of determination on his face not wholly obscured by his patriarchal beard, whose hitherto uncomfortable presence he had quite forgotten, a slight movement of the pantry door caught his eye. He seized the door-knob. It would not turn for a moment; then it slipped slowly round, for his fingers were stronger than hers.

The two confronted each other — the white-bearded gentleman, with the figure of an athlete and the eyes of an excited youth, and the slim girl in the gray silk, with cheeks like her scarlet ribbons.

"What does this mean?" demanded Santa Claus. He put forth one vigorous arm and drew the runaway out from the closet by her resisting hand.

"Just what it says, I should think," answered Shirley, bravely, although trembling. Had she offended him? Through the whole transaction that had been the one burden of her anxiety. "It does n't say it very clearly, but she never tried writing limericks before. They 're not so easy as you might think."

"She! Who?"

"'S. Townsend.'"

"Do you mean to say you 've actually bought that mortgage?"

"Murray did the business. I did n't see Mr. Thorn."

"But you own the mortgage?"

"Yes."

"Thorn did n't want to sell it."

"No — but he had to take payment if it came when the mortgage matured."

"It is n't due for six weeks yet."

"He did n't mind being paid sooner, when he found all hope of the chance of foreclosing was gone."

"He would n't sell for the face of it?"

"I 'm not familiar with business terms," urged Shirley.

"Not? A girl who holds a position with Townsend & Company! Tell me, Shirley — you did n't get that mortgage six weeks before it was due, for the face value of it?"

"Not quite."

"How much did you pay?"

"Not more than it was worth."

"Please tell me *how much more* you paid."

"I think that 's my affair," said Shirley, with her head up. But her eyes were down.

There was a silence. Peter put his hand

to his mouth with intent to cover a sudden urgent and unwonted necessity to steady his lips. He encountered the beard, tore it off, and cast the wig beside it upon the floor. A young man with a face of mingled light and shadow emerged from the disguise of the elderly one.

"If I did n't know that, with this farm as security, you 'd made a safe investment, I could n't stand this," he said, in a low tone. "But I know that making a safe investment was the last thing you cared about. You wanted to stand by in a time of need—and you 've done it."

"You must n't think," said Shirley, looking up eagerly, "that you 're under the least obligation to me. It 's just as you say. The farm itself is more than security. It 's merely a matter of business. You know, I 'm learning to manage my little affairs. Father thought it would be good for me. And a change of investment like this is great fun."

Peter looked at her steadily. "Oh, no, we 're not under the least obligation to you!" he answered. "It 's very easy to find people to take a mortgage at terms that will induce a man to sell it who 's looking for a chance to foreclose — that 's why I have n't done any worrying about the matter! Shirley — you 're——" he seized her hand. "You 're ——"

"It 's all right," said Shirley, turning her head away with a sudden access of shyness. There was no knowing what terms Peter might be going to use, when his voice dropped to that vibrating note.

But she did not escape. Peter was ordinarily a self-controlled young man, with a cool head not likely to be carried away by sudden emotion. But he had a warm heart, none the less, and the girl's friendly act had touched him deeply. Besides, he was, as has been admitted before, entirely human, and Shirley, in her gray and scarlet, with her brilliant cheeks and drooping eyes, was a very captivating figure. Tightening his grasp upon her hand he ended his impulsive speech half under his breath with —"You 're the — dearest — girl in the world!"

What he would have said — or done — next can only be conjectured, for upon this unexpected and most disconcerting demonstration Shirley pulled her hand away and ran — somewhere — anywhere — she did not just know where. In this indefinite region she remained for fully half an hour. In the end she had to come back to the living-room, but when she did it was not to look at Peter.

As for Peter himself, when he had got rid of his Santa Claus costume and put himself in

order again, he also came back to the living-room. His face had been put in order as well as his dress, and nobody noticed anything odd about him. But there *was* something odd about him — very odd. He felt like a railway locomotive off the track, obliged to convey to the beholders, by its steadiness of gait, the impression that it was still on!

CHAPTER IX

A RED GLARE

"BY ALL that 's astonishing, are you actually idling? And may I come and idle, too?"

Shirley looked up from the depths of one of the capacious willow chairs, which, well stocked with cushions, were favourite lounging-places upon the great side porch of the Townsend house, and from which one could look out over a long and charming stretch of lawn toward the tennis-court.

It was a warm evening in late May. Everybody else was away, and Shirley had settled herself for one of the rare hours of rest and solitude which she so much enjoyed when her work was done. But she answered Brant Hille cordially:

"Of course you may, if you will be nice and soothing. These first warm days make me feel a trifle lazy."

"Not strange, when you spend them in a stuffy office." Brant accepted the cushions she tossed to him, and disposed himself comfortably upon them on the top step near her feet.

"The office is n't stuffy. I 've sat by a wide-open window all day. Besides, the first thing Murray did when he went in with father was to overhaul our whole system of ventilation. So the office is never stuffy, even in winter."

"Don't be belligerent, or I 'll not be responsible for the soothing effects of my society. What can I do to lull you to repose? You don't like banjo music, or I 'd have brought my banjo over. It 's just the evening for that."

"If you had, you 'd have gone home again."

"You *are* in a sweet mood!" Brant spoke with the familiarity of old acquaintance. "Would you object to telling me what 's gone wrong with your ladyship?"

"I can't find out the French for certain phrases it 's necessary to use in the correspondence we have on hand just now. There are no equivalents for the idioms that I can discover as yet, and it 's most important that I get them right. I 've practically had to make a phrase-book for myself so far, because the dictionaries and hand-books don't give the terms I want. I got hold of some old correspondence last week that helped me immensely, but to-day I was completely baffled. I suppose it has got on my nerves, and made me fractious."

Yet she did not look particularly nerve-worn,

lying there in the low chair, in her thin white frock, her round arms resting upon the arms of the chair, her head thrown back, as she regarded her visitor from under low-sweeping lashes. Neither did she look in the least like the young woman of business she had become.

Brant was always trying to convince himself that her work was spoiling her — it would be a comforting realisation if he could think it. But as often as he had succeeded in making himself half believe that some other girl, whose ways of living were such as he approved, was nearly as attractive as Shirley Townsend, just so often did the sight of Shirley in some unbusinesslike surroundings upset his convictions. To-night she looked particularly feminine and alluring, in spite of her avowed fractiousness and her explanation of the cause.

"All baffling things wear on one," he answered, with an air of being sympathetic. "I know how it is, from experience. I 'd like a dictionary or a phrase-book myself — one that would tell me what to say to you when you want to be 'soothed.' Shall I go in and get a book of verse and read aloud to you?"

"Please don't."

"Fiction, then?"

"Worse and worse."

"History? Philosphy? Science? Travel? — Or humour?"

"None of them. I don't like to be read to — as a duty."

"Duty! I 'd be delighted."

"I should n't, then."

"What *do* you want?"

"Silence, I think," said the girl in the chair, with a mischievous look at the back of her companion's head. Her face was demure again, however, when he turned. "Don't you like just to sit and gaze off into space on a languid night like this, and say nothing at all?"

"If you prefer to have me go home ——"

"Not in the least. I' d like to know you were there on call — if you would n't talk."

A silence of some length ensued. Brant stared moodily off over the darkening lawn, watching distant electric lights twinkle into existence along the rows of tree-tops which outlined the streets. Shirley closed her eyes. She really was more weary than she knew. It had been a busy winter in the office, and she had worked hard to be able to fill the place she held. Her achievements in the matter of the technical French correspondence had proved of considerable importance to the firm, and her satisfaction at becoming so useful had led her to

spend much of her spare time in making herself proficient.

It was fully fifteen minutes — he thought it at least an hour — before Brant looked around. He had vowed to himself that he would give her all the silence she wanted, that he would not speak until she spoke. But after a time her absolute motionlessness struck him as caused by something even less flattering to himself than her desire for absence of speech.

"Confound it — I believe she 's gone to sleep!" he said to himself, and rose abruptly, to stand looking down at her, discomfited and very nearly angry. Of all the odd girls, one who would tell you to stop talking, and then go off to sleep in your presence, was certainly the oddest. He supposed she might be tired, and with reason, but — to go to sleep!

The shaded electric bulbs, which hung at each corner of the porch, at this moment came glowingly into life, as somebody within switched on the current. They were not designed to illuminate the porch strongly, only to turn its gloom into a mellow moonlight effect. But the light was quite sufficient to show Brant that although Shirley's lashes still swept her cheek, her lips were smiling.

"It was a frightful test of your friendship,

was n't it?" she murmured, without opening her eyes. "But you did nobly. I never thought you could hold out so long!"

"You — rascal! I 'll wager you wanted to talk, yourself, after a while."

"Of course I did. The minute a woman gets what she wants, she wants — something else."

"What is it now? Me to go home?"

"How distrustful of yourself you are to-night!"

"That 's the effect you usually have on me." Brant drew up a chair. "Shirley," he began again abruptly, "do you know what I wish?"

"No."

"Do you want to know it?"

"Not badly."

"You don't care a straw for me, do you?"

"Several straws."

"You do! I say ——"

A door opened. Sophy said, deferentially, "You 're wanted at the telephone, if you please, Miss Shirley."

Shirley vanished. Brant rose and paced about the porch, waiting.

"Of course it 's no use!" he said, discontentedly, to himself. "I 've got as far as this forty times —and no farther. The next thing she did would be to throw a soaking wet blanket over me. I

ought to be used to it. But she might at least take me seriously. She never does. It 's no good — this growing up with a girl and then trying to convince her that you mean anything when you speak!"

Inside, Shirley was listening to a rapid fire of words which woke her up as thoroughly as anything had ever done in her life. They came in the voice of Peter Bell, a voice at once excited and controlled:

"Shirley, the factory is on fire. I don't want father to hear about it — he 'd come down — you understand. Will you think up some way to get him off with yourself for the next hour? We 'll probably have to turn in a general alarm, and if we do, somebody 'll be sure to call him up and tell him. That 's all. I can count on you?"

"Yes — yes. Peter ——"

But Peter was already gone. Evidently he had no time to spare for answering questions. Shirley turned away from the telephone, thinking rapidly.

She knew that Mr. Joseph Bell was at home, for she had seen him, an hour earlier, training vines over the front porch. She understood that Peter had remained for late work at the factory office, as he so often did, although it was

now nearly nine o'clock. And she knew well that it would never do for Peter's father to go down to the burning building—the excitement of a great fire at his own place of business would be the worst thing in the world for him.

Mr. Joseph Bell had kept steadily on at his work throughout the year, and nothing that Peter had feared had happened. It had been arranged somehow so that the most fatiguing part of his duties now came upon the broad shoulders of the son instead of the bent ones of the father. But it was as necessary as ever that there should be no sudden strain, either physical or mental, and it was this which she now must prevent.

Brant Hille, waiting impatiently outside, saw Shirley fly back to him, and looked up at her with gratification. But her first words made him sit up, for she spoke in haste:

"Brant, is your car ready for a start?"

"Always is. Want to ——"

"Will you get it — quick? The Armstrong paper-factory is on fire. Mr. Bell must n't know it. I can't stop to explain. I must get him away where he won't hear. I 'll go ask him and Mrs. Bell to take a drive with us — out to the farm, perhaps. I 'll run over. You drive round there — will you?"

"Why on earth should n't he know? He ——"

"Oh, don't stop to talk about it. I 'll tell you afterward. The general alarm may go in any minute, and somebody will telephone him if he 's at the house. Quick — please!"

Of course Brant did not understand, but Shirley's manner was not to be taken lightly. Even as she spoke she left him and ran indoors again. Well, if he could serve her, it would be better than having to sit beside her in silence while she thought about technical French phrases. Besides, he was an enthusiastic motorist, and a hurry call for the car always gave him more or less pleasure. He bolted across the lawn, through the hedge by a short cut to the street, and so to his own home, on the farther side of Worthington Square.

Shirley hurried across Gay Street, having stopped only to pick up a long coat and scarf. She caught sight of Mrs. Bell's light skirt at the edge of the vine-screen of the porch.

"Is n't it a perfect night?" Mrs. Bell heard a familiar, clear-toned voice ask. "Don't you and Mr. Bell want to take a gentle little spin down Northboro road in Mr. Hille's car? He 's asked me out, and given me leave to invite whomever I want. I 'd love to have you."

Mr. Brant Hille—inviting Mr. and Mrs.

Joseph Bell to go motoring with him at nine o'clock on a May evening — there was no precedent for this! But Mrs. Bell, with the intuition of the mother of young people, thought she understood. Shirley wanted a chaperon, and her kind young heart prompted her to ask a pair who were not much accustomed to the delights of automobiling in the moonlight.

"Why, yes, we 'll go," said Mr. Bell, getting up from his rocking-chair. "We 're all alone to-night — the young people are off at a party. If you 'll persuade the young man not to put on too much speed."

So in less than five minutes the party were settling themselves in the big green car, its headlights making a wide, brilliant track before it down the quiet street.

"All ready?" asked Hille, and started the car. As it began to move, the distant but distinct sound of a telephone-bell struck upon Shirley's ear. Mr. Bell turned his head.

"Was that in our house?" he asked.

Mrs. Bell was tying a scarf over her hair, slightly muffling her ears. She had not heard.

"Go on — fast!" breathed Shirley in Hille's ear. The street was nearly empty, and he obeyed. For a moment Mr. Bell's attention was taken by the new sensation of speed,—not

appreciable speed, from the motorist's standpoint, because the car was within city limits, but to the novice considerable.

At the intersection of Gay Street with Conner Street it was possible to look for a moment straight down toward the heart of the city, into the business district. A red glare was plainly visible, although partly dimmed by hundreds of twinkling electric lights between.

"Must be a big fire," said Mr. Bell, straining his eyes to see. Then the trees and houses hid the city from view. "It was down our way, too. I wish I could telephone the factory and find out. Peter's there. He 'd know. Might be that was our telephone-bell that rang."

"I did n't hear any bell, dear," his wife assured him.

"A fire always looks nearer than it is," said Hille, over his shoulder, driving on without diminishing his speed. Instead, he accelerated it. The street was a quiet one, there was nobody in sight.

"One summer, when I was a little girl, and we were staying in the country, father and I walked half a mile to see a fire — and found a big red moon coming up behind the trees," said Shirley, and talked lightly on.

Brant seconded her efforts with skill, for which

she inwardly thanked him, and between them they soon had the thoughts of their guests far away from the dangerous subject. They ran quickly through the suburbs out into the open country, taking the Northboro road, for that course led directly away from the red glare which, as Shirley covertly glanced back from time to time, could be clearly perceived on the western side of the city behind them.

Gaily as she talked and laughed, the girl's thoughts were with Peter. He was somewhere back in that red glare, working, without doubt, if there were anything for him to do. She was thankful that it was after hours, and that there were probably few of the factory hands about the place, yet there were undoubtedly many things to be saved in the office — books and papers and drawings. She knew Peter well enough to be sure that his own personal safety would be the last thing he would think of, so long as he could do what might look like his duty to the house he served.

The Bells did not know how far they went, nor did they guess at what a pace. Brant's machine was a fine one, and he was an expert at smooth running. The flight through the warm moonlight was a delightful experience, for few curves and no sharp grades gave accent

to the speed, and the hour flew by as swiftly as the road. When they turned again toward the city, the crimson glow upon the clouds had gone.

"The fire is out," remarked Mr. Bell, as they arrived at the top of a small hill in the suburbs, from which he could see into the heart of the business district. "Hope it was n't as serious as it looked."

But Brant's eyes and Shirley's, younger and sharper, could make out a dense mass of smoke hanging over the place where the flames had been.

"It won't do to take them home yet," thought the girl, setting her wits at work again.

The result was an invitation to the Bells to alight at the great porch of the Townsend house, instead of in Gay Street, with the promise of some light refreshment. At first they shook their heads; but Hille declared so loudly that he knew what Shirley had to offer, and could not think of letting them down short of the full measure of the entertainment, that there seemed to be no way out without spoiling the pleasure of the two young people. So presently they were all partaking of a hastily concocted iced drink, served with tiny cakes, and laughing over Hille's stories of certain college incidents, which he

told with gusto, incited thereto by Shirley's whispered, "You 're helping me splendidly. Please keep it up, and I 'll be forever in your debt."

"If there 's any way of making you forever in my debt," Brant made reply under his breath, "I 'll do a continuous performance for your friends till daylight."

But such an effort as this would have been was unnecessary. Mrs. Bell presently took her husband away, and since it was a late hour, and no other chaperons appeared upon the scene, Brant was forced to go, also. He was obliged to give up making any further attempts at gaining headway in Shirley's good graces, for although she dismissed him with hearty thanks, it was with an air of abstraction hardly to be wondered at. Her one desire was to hear the telephone-bell ring again, and learn that although the factory might have burned to the ground, no lives were lost — and that not a hair of her friend's head was hurt.

She stood alone upon the porch, waiting anxiously, when the Townsend landau drove in at the gate, bringing home Murray and Jane, who had been out to dinner.

"There she is," said Murray, with suppressed excitement. The next instant he was out, had whirled Jane out also, and was grasping his young sister's hands.

"Don't be frightened — it 's all right. But a few things have happened this evening. The Armstrong factory ——"

"I know. Is it gone?"

"To the foundations. Peter found the fire, fought it alone till the firemen came, rescued the night-watchman — played the leading part generally — till an accident put him out. My word!—that fellow ——Well — he 's all right, but he 's burned a bit, and his leg 's broken. He was so confoundedly risky, trying to save the last calendar on the wall ——"

"Where is he?"

"St. Martin's Hospital. We 've just come from there. He got his knock-out the first half-hour after the thing began, so there 's been time to get him fixed up. Our man Larrabee was at the fire, saw Peter put into the ambulance, and telephoned me at the Kingsfords'. Tried three times to get his people at home, but could n't. See here, he wants you to tell his mother — says Jane is too much upset."

Shirley looked at Jane. "I 'm not upset," said Jane, but her lips were unsteady. Murray put his arm around her.

"You see, Larrabee thought it was worse than it was with Peter, when they put him in the ambulance. He was stunned by the fall

that broke his leg. It gave Janey a bad shock, and no wonder—it did me. But the old boy 's himself again, all right, and his one idea is to let his mother know why he does n't come home, but to keep even the news of the factory fire from his father to-night, if he can. We don't see why, but he seems to, so we 'll follow his wishes. It 's the least we can do for him."

Shirley slipped through the hedge, and slowly crossed Gay Street in the moonlight. She was trying hard to be cool and do as Peter wanted her to do. If she rang, Mr. Bell would come to the door, and then how should she manage, what excuse should she give? She thought of a way.

"Mr. Bell," she said when he appeared, "Janey 's come home from her party—and she 's had just a little bit too much party. She feels like a small girl again, and wants her mother to come over for a few minutes."

"Why, of course," said Mr.. Bell, heartily, from the shadow of the doorway. "Nothing much the matter with the little girl?"

"Oh, no—she 'll be all right in the morning."

So Mrs. Bell crossed the road with Shirley, and the girl, with her arm round the elder woman's shoulders, gently told her the news. Mrs. Bell took it as Peter had known she would, quietly,

although, aside from his personal injury, there was much cause for anxious thought in the loss of the factory and the consequent putting of its workers out of employment.

When Peter's mother had gone home again, resting on Murray's promise that in the morning he would take her to the hospital, Shirley turned to her brother. He had taken Jane upstairs, and come down again, himself too restless to go to bed. He discovered his sister to be in a like mood, and they sat down once more in the moonlit porch to talk it over, regardless of the hour, which was past midnight.

"I wonder sometimes," said Murray, suddenly, when he had told Shirley in detail all he knew of the events of the evening, "whether anybody but me fully appreciates that chap, Peter Bell. Do you know what I've been thinking a long time? That he's the man we need at the head of one of our departments. From all I can learn, he's been growing as nearly invaluable to the Armstrongs as a man can be, yet they haven't raised his salary for two years. Now's our chance to jump in and get him. If I can only convince father — and I think he's pretty nearly convinced — I'll make Peter an offer to-morrow. Pretty good medicine for a broken leg and burned hands — eh?"

"I should hope it would be."

"You 'd like to see him in the business, would n't you?"

"If you think him fit for it."

"If I think him fit! What about you?"

"How can I judge? It 's for you to say."

Murray looked sharply at her, in the shaded light of the electric bulbs. He smiled, for in spite of her remarkably quiet manner, her fingers, unconsciously twisting and untwisting her delicate handkerchief, were, as he put it to himself, "giving her away." He had an idea that it mattered a good deal to his sister what Peter Bell's future might be, although he was confident that there was no understanding between them.

If he knew Peter, that young man was not the one to ask to marry a rich man's daughter until his own feet were on substantial ground. But that Peter cared, and cared very deeply, for Murray Townsend's sister, Murray was well assured.

"It 's for me to say, is it?" he went on, wickedly persisting in his theme. "But it 's for you to think! How about having him round our office every day — desk next mine — giving you dictation, now and then, maybe, when it suits me to put it off on him? Think you could stand it? Look up at him as coolly as you do at me? Could

you, Miss Townsend, stenographer? See here, what are you jumping up for?"

"Because you are getting impudent," responded Miss Townsend, turning her head so that her face was in shadow. Her heart was beating so quickly she was afraid her brother would recognise the fact. It had been an agitating evening all through, and now this last suggestion was rather more than she could face with composure.

"I 've a notion P. B. himself could put up with the situation," went on Murray, watching her. "His dictation might be a trifle flurried at first, and he might forget himself now and then, and ignore those purely businesslike relations which should always exist between a business man and his stenographer. But I 've no doubt that by a judicious course of snubbing you could ——"

But he was talking to the empty air. By a hasty flight and the abrupt closing of a door, his sister had put herself out of range.

CHAPTER X

PETER PREFERS THE PORCH

"YOU 'RE quite sure you want me?" asked Peter Bell.

"Quite sure," replied Murray Townsend. The two pairs of eyes looked into each other.

Peter's gaze shifted to his father. "I 'll do it under one condition," he said. "That father gives up factory work and goes to live at the old farm."

Mr. Harrison Townsend turned also toward Mr. Joseph Bell. He smiled slightly, noting the hesitation of the other man.

"It 's time you and I retired, Bell," said he. "I 've been getting to the point for a long time. Let 's make a bargain of it. If you 'll go back to the farm, I 'll come and spend a good share of my time there. I 'd like to help with the haying. I should enjoy watching the cows come home. I 'll venture to say I could drive a mowing-machine — for an hour or two."

The four men occupied the small rear porch of the house in Gay Street, looking out on Nancy's

garden. Peter lay upon a couch, his leg in splints, his hands in bandages. After a few days at the hospital he had been brought home, to spend the long hours of his recovery where he could bear them best. The other three were close by, Murray nearest. He had put off making his proposition to Peter until he and his father could arrive at a perfect agreement as to every term of the offer.

Joseph Bell met his son's meaning gaze with understanding. He knew nothing counted with Peter as did the anxiety over his father's physical condition. He had kept his boy a long time upon the rack, because of his own unwillingness to give up his old work. But the work was taken away from him now; there would be a considerable interval before the Armstrongs would be ready for him again; and he could hardly think of trying for a new position. Meanwhile, the haying season was approaching. He thought with longing of the scent of the newly cut grass. He could not work hard out under the sun, he knew that; but — he could play at work. And his friend, Harrison Townsend, rich man though he was, was offering to play, too.

He looked at Peter and smiled, under his short gray beard. Peter smiled back entreatingly. Slowly Joseph Bell nodded. "All right,

Peter," he said. "I 'll let you have your way at last."

For a moment Peter could not speak. He lay with dropped eyelids, fighting lest the sudden relief from the long strain should unman him before these who had been paying tribute to his manhood. But after a short space he looked from Mr. Townsend to his son.

"I 'll come," said he, and forgetting his bandaged hands, started to hold one out. Then he smiled whimsically, and added in an odd tone, "If you 're not afraid of the bad omen in taking on a man with a pair of hands like these?"

"Not much, when we remember what put them in that shape!" declared Murray, in a tone of great satisfaction; and his father gave an emphatic assent.

"What do you think 's going to happen *now?*" cried Nancy, rushing out upon Peter's porch, a week later.

"Give it up. But nothing can surprise me, after recent events," replied Peter, removing his gaze for a moment from the morning newspaper pinned up in front of him to the excited face of his sister, but looking immediately back again at the absorbing column of business news he had been with some difficulty perusing. His

hands had been slow in recovering from the severe injuries they had received.

"This will. Somebody 's going to be married."

"Remarkable. But such events have occurred before in the history of nations," replied her brother, abstractedly.

"Not at the Townsend house, for Murray married Jane over here. Ah, ha! I thought you 'd give me your undivided attention at last!" crowed Nancy, triumphantly.

Peter did his best to look unconcerned, but his heart had begun to thump quite suddenly and disconcertingly. He waited. He forgot the newspaper.

"Have n't you noticed how devoted Brant Hille has been for the last year?" Nancy demanded.

"No."

"Then you 've been blind."

"I 've been busy."

"How oddly you speak! Is your throat sore?"

"Don't tease, Nan. I 'm not up to it." It was no use trying to look unconcerned.

Nancy saw, and took pity on him, as she might not have done if he had been upon his feet. "It 's Olive, then — though I believe I could have made you think it was Shirley. It 's not Brant Hille's fault that it is n't, I can tell you that. Olive's

going to marry an Englishman she met last summer abroad — Mr. Arthur Crewe of Manchester. It 's just announced. The wedding 's to be the first of July. You 'll be on crutches, Peter. Is n't that lucky? You can go."

"Oh, yes, I 'll dance at the wedding!" agreed Peter, looking as if the shot that missed him had come uncomfortably close.

"It 's going to be a big wedding — a gorgeous one. Is n't that like Olive? Shirley 's to be maid of honour, and there 'll be six bridesmaids. Six ushers — and you 'd have been one if you had n't broken your leg. Olive told me so."

"Compensation in all things," murmured Peter.

"The best man is the Englishman's brother. Olive says he 's stunning. Would n't it be funny if he and Shirley should take a fancy to each other? The maid of honour and the best man often do, you know."

"Very interesting. I should say you had been taking a course of novels, you 're so full of possible plots." And Peter eyed his newspaper as if he preferred its practical columns to his sister's outlines of sentimental situations. Nancy laughed.

"Shirley 's to have a vacation, for a week before the wedding. Perhaps she 'll find time to get over to see you oftener, then."

"She 's been over to see me."

"How many times?"

"Twice."

"For how long?"

"Five minutes, the first time, three, the second."

"How many other people present?"

"A dozen or so."

"Have a satisfactory visit?"

"Oh, very!" Peter hit the newspaper with his elbow, and it fell down. "What have you got it in for me this morning for, Sis?" he demanded, wrathfully.

Nancy stopped laughing and looked serious. "It won't hurt you any. It may wake you up. I just want you to know that I 'm honestly and truly worried about Brant Hille."

Then she vanished, and Peter lay wishing he had two good legs, that he might get up and go and see for himself just how much all this meant. He read the newspaper no more that morning; it lay forgotten on the floor where it had fallen.

The weeks went by slowly enough to the convalescent, impatient to begin his new work, and full of plans for it. Long talks with Murray helped most to make the waiting endurable, and the two young men grew to know and respect each other still more deeply than ever before.

Everybody was kind. Both Mr. and Mrs. Townsend came often to see Peter; and even Olive, although at times distraught with the business of preparation for her approaching marriage, found a half-hour now and then in which to slip across to Gay Street and talk with him.

At these times she found decided refreshment in his society, for Peter's ideas on the subject of matrimony were both novel and sensible, and in after years she often found herself remembering and putting into practice one or another of his quizzical maxims, founded on much shrewd observation.

"You are coming to my wedding, you know," she said, on the last of these occasions, three days before the date set for that event. "And I want you at dinner the evening before, so you may get to know Mr. Crewe, and he you, as well as you can in one short evening. I'm so disappointed he could n't be here all this week, as he planned."

"Dinners?— weddings?— on these sticks?" scoffed Peter, that day promoted to crutches and finding them as yet merely invitations to ironic humour.

"Certainly. If you make them an excuse for staying away, I shall never forgive you."

"Please let me off from the dinner. If you 'll put me in the porch, and let me be found there afterward, I 'll agree, but I can't hobble out to the table on crutches of torture."

"Not even to take out Shirley?" Olive glanced at him mischievously, and saw him colour slightly as he answered:

"That would be an inducement if anything would. But I 'm sure you 'll adopt my point of view if I beg you to."

"Then I shall have to send her in with Geoffrey Crewe — or Brant Hille."

"Will the men stay behind when the ladies come out?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then I prefer the porch," persisted Peter, comfortably; and Olive acknowledged that he had chosen the wiser part.

So on Tuesday evening, when Shirley, in the midst of a rainbow-tinted group of young women, floated airily out from the brightly lighted and oppressively warm dining-room to the cool, softly lighted recesses of the great porch, it was with a sense of refreshing change that she went straight to the big chair by a pillar, where Peter sat waiting for her. As she dropped into a low seat by his side, she thought she had never seen him show to greater advantage, although he could not

rise to do her honour, and could only say, with a straight, upward glance, "This is kind of you. I 've been thinking for an hour how you 'd look when you came out that door."

"Do I look it?"

"My imagination fell a long way short. It 's months since I 've seen you in this sort of thing."

He indicated her gauzy evening frock of pale rose-colour. A wreath of tiny rosebuds crowned her hair; a little silver basket of roses, ribbon-tied, lay in her lap, a dinner favour like those the others carried, but suiting her attire with special charm.

"Do you remember our first party?" asked Shirley, smiling at him.

"I certainly do," Peter assured her. "You had on a white dress and pink ribbons — pink slippers, too. You came up and slid your hand into mine, because you saw I was feeling lonely. You were jolly kind to me that night, and I never forgot it. I suppose I was a pitiful object, standing there looking on, all by myself'

"You did n't look pitiful at all, but rather superior, if I remember, like a big St Bernard, condescending to watch the antics of a lot of frolicsome terriers."

Peter threw back his head and laughed low, with a gleam of white teeth Whatever there might have been that was odd about Peter's

appearance at that first party, there could be no criticism of his looks to-night.

Olive, taking critical note of Shirley's companion, owned that she should feel no hesitation in presenting him to Mr. Arthur Crewe and his brother as a connection of the family. When that moment arrived, the American and the Englishmen appeared to take a frank liking to one another on the spot, for the Crewes both sat down to talk, and Peter, sitting up, met them half-way in a cordial effort to become acquainted in the brief time allotted them.

"Will you tell me what you think of him?" It was Olive, slipping for a moment toward the end of the evening into the chair by Peter's, he being temporarily left to himself.

"I think he 's a man," said Peter, heartily, and to the point. "There 's nothing better I could say than that, is there?"

"I suppose not, being one yourself. A woman would think it necessary to add a number of complimentary things about his appearance and his manner and all that."

"I could do that, at a pinch," said Peter, smiling, "for my memory would tell me that they were all right, though I thought nothing about them at the time. I was looking to see what it was you were going to marry, and I

found out — as far as a half-hour's talk would show it. I wish you great happiness, Olive — and I believe you 'll get it."

"Thank you," and Olive was gone again, being in constant demand, as the central figure of the occasion. She found time, however, to ask much the same question of Arthur Crewe concerning Peter Bell, and received so nearly the same sort of answer that she laughed, and told him of the similarity in the two estimates.

"I am flattered," said Crewe, "for I don't know when I 've met a young American I 've liked better. He 's both frank and reserved — a combination which appeals to me. It looks a bit as if you were going to have him in the family, I believe you told me? I sincerely hope you will — though, if you don't mind my saying it, now that I see your sister, I feel as if I 'd like to leave Geoffrey here for the summer, with deliberate intention. I fancy it 's too late for that, though."

"I 'm glad you like Peter. It would be too unkind to the family to take more than one daughter to England."

"See how well Geoffrey appreciates his privileges?" whispered Crewe, indicating his brother, as that personable young man went by with Shirley, his manner suggesting concentration of attention

upon the subject in hand. Then he looked in Peter's direction. "The chap in the chair is n't deserted, is he ? I think each bridesmaid has taken a turn at him, and he seems equal to them all."

However this might have been, Peter found himself thoroughly weary at the end of the evening, and glad to be put into a wheeled chair and taken home, ignominious as that mode of departure seemed. Arthur Crewe insisted on walking at Peter's elbow, all the way round to the house in Gay Street and the two parted with friendly warmth of good-will on each side.

According to Nancy, who kept Peter informed, Geoffrey Crewe neglected none of the opportunities afforded him by his brief visit, and in one way and another Shirley was kept busy all the next day. The wedding was to take place in the evening, so Peter had plenty of time to rest and reflect on the advantages an able-bodied man has over a temporary cripple, as he caught glimpses, from time to time, of such sights as Shirley driving off in the trap with the younger Englishman, or sitting beside Brant Hille as he took a portion of the bridal party away for a spin in his big green car.

Olive had chosen to be married at home, so every effort at effective decoration had been expended upon the house and grounds in

Worthington Square. For a hot night in July, it was expected that the outdoor arrangements would be most popular, and the great lawn, with its natural beauties of landscape-gardening enhanced by the devices of electricity and Chinese lanterns, flowers and bunting, was like a fairyland.

"If a fellow's will amounted to anything, a scene like this would make him get on his legs, if both of them were only just out of the repair-shop!" groaned Peter, as he was brought through the gates by Rufus at an early hour. He took note of the paths winding away through the grounds, made enticing to promenades by every witchery of art, and his imagination already pictured Shirley, in her maid-of-honour attire, floating away down one of them, devotedly attended by Brant Hille or Geoffrey Crewe.

"Cheer up. The wounded-hero rôle is awfully taking with the girls, you know," consoled Rufus, divining the tantalising effect of this stage setting upon his handicapped brother.

"Wounded hero be shot!" retorted Peter. "It would be the most soothing thing that could happen to him. Would you like to change places with him, instead of being able to dash about in search of what you want?"

"I should n't mind, if my crippled condition

seemed to have the hypnotic effect yours did last evening. According to Nancy, the bride-elect was n't in it with you at posing as an interesting figure. She said the bridesmaids were four deep around you."

"Kind-hearted things — they were nearly the finish of me. When I become a society man please notify my family. I shall not have the brains, myself."

"I will. Where will you be placed for the ceremony?"

"Behind a screen of palms, if possible," requested Peter. He did not get his wish literally, but by grace of a special plea to one of the ushers, he was put in an inconspicuous place of great advantage, where he could not only view the entire scene, but could watch the bridal party during its whole course, from stair-landing to improvised altar beneath a vine-covered canopy at one end of the long drawing-room.

Olive made a strikingly beautiful bride, as her friends had known she would, and her bridesmaids were nearly all more than ordinarily fair — or seemed so in their picturesque garb. But to Peter, in all the bridal party there was only one face and figure worth more than a moment's glance. And when the maid-of-honour finally turned away from the altar to take her position

by the side of the best man for the ceremonies of reception and congratulation which followed upon the conclusion of the marriage service, the one onlooker who could not get up and take his place in the gay company forming in line to greet the bridal party, was feeling more than ever like a stranded canal-boat in the company of a fleet of racing yachts.

They came to him, however, when they were free — Olive Crewe and her husband, Shirley and Mr. Geoffrey Crewe, several of the bridesmaids, and even Brant Hille, and Peter said all the things that were expected of him, and said them well. He might be no "society man," as he had said, but he possessed the self-command and quickness of wit which take the place of familiarity with such situations. Arthur Crewe liked him better than ever as the two shook hands, and Peter spoke his quiet but earnest words of felicitation and prophecy for the future.

"I 'm sorry I can't be here to see you when you get about again," said Crewe, at parting. "I can quite fancy the energy and enthusiasm you put into your work."

"I don't need to see you at yours to be sure you 're a steam-engine both at project and performance," responded Peter, smiling.

"We 'd work jolly well together, I venture to

say," said the Englishman. "Perhaps we 'll have the chance some day."

"I wish we might," and Peter gave the friendly hand a hearty grip. "Good-bye — good-bye. The best of luck."

Peter sat alone upon the Townsend porch, waiting for someone to come and take him home. Everything was over; the bridal pair had gone; the last lingerers along the lantern-lighted paths among the shrubbery had straggled in and reluctantly taken their departure. The big marquee in the centre of the lawn, where supper had been served, was empty except for scurrying caterer's men. The string orchestra stationed in the summer-house had at last stopped playing, mopped their perspiring heads, and packed up their instruments. Mrs. Townsend had betaken herself to her room in a state of collapse, requiring the attendance of her husband and Jane; and Murray paced up and down the upper hall, thinking to himself that he had never before realised what unpleasant things weddings were when they occurred in one's own family.

As for Shirley, no one had laid eyes upon her since the moment when the Townsend landau had driven away, with everybody throwing *confetti*, and Olive, leaning out, had flung her bouquet

straight at her sister's feet. Everybody had laughed as Shirley picked it up, but the girl had run away with the white bridal roses crushed close against her breast, her lips set tight and her eyes brilliant with unshed tears. She and Olive had been more to each other during this last year than ever before — and England, as a place of permanent residence, seemed a very, very long way off.

It was odd that at the last everybody seemed to have forgotten Peter. Ross, laughing with a pretty girl, had walked directly past him and gone home, unmindful. Peter had supposed he would come back, but he did not. The servants were busy, the quiet of the deserted porch restful, and Peter leaned his head against one of the tall white pillars, thinking less of the evening that was past than of the future that was coming — so soon as he could walk sturdily about once more.

Up through the narrowest and least conspicuous path of all, one which few of the wedding revelers had noticed because its entrance was designedly unlighted, came a slim white figure with bent head. Peter, gazing dreamily out over the lawn, saw it at once, and recognised it with a start of gladness.

Shirley came on across the velvety grass

without looking up, and slowly ascended the porch steps with her eyes still cast down. Reaching the top, she turned about and stood leaning against the pillar, on the other side of which was Peter's chair, without noticing his presence, staring off at the rainbow-tinted lights, and seeing a little misty halo about each one.

When she had stood motionless there for some time, Peter spoke, so quietly that he hardly startled her. She turned about with a little choking breath, said, "Oh, is it *you?*" in a tone of relief, and resumed her former position.

"I wish I could help make it easier," said Peter, very gently. "You 've made things easier for me so many times, first and last."

"You do," said Shirley, in a half-whisper.

"Do I? I 'm glad. But how?"

"Just by being there."

Peter's face lighted up. This was a most unusual tribute from his independent little friend. He got slowly to his crutches, and with a greater effort than he had yet made, came stumping round to her side of the pillar, and stood near her, leaning against a great green tub which held a towering palm. He felt somehow as if he must be literally upon his feet in order to stand by her in this crisis.

Both were silent again for some minutes,

until suddenly Shirley looked round at him, and exclaimed, "Why, I must n't let you stand like this! Please sit down again."

"Not unless you do."

"Why? I 'm not tired."

"But I want to be near you. I 've done nothing all the evening but envy the men who could get about and do things for you."

"You 'll soon be walking off at your usual breakneck pace," said Shirley, the colour coming back with a rush into cheeks which had been pale since Olive went.

"To the office — yes — your office. I can hardly wait. But I wonder sometimes if I can keep my wits and do my work there."

"Why not?"

"Don't you know why?"

Shirley's little moist ball of a handkerchief was all at once being clutched very tight in her fingers. She shook her head.

"I think you do. I think you must know why I 'm half out of my head with the prospect of being manager of the new house of Townsend & Son."

"I 'm glad that you like the prospect," said Shirley, in the lowest of voices, and looking anywhere but at Peter.

"Are you? Do *you* like it?"

"Very much."

Peter forgot his crutches, and one of them fell with a rattle at Shirley's feet. She would have bent to pick it up, but he prevented her, and laboriously reached for it himself.

"I 'm not going," said Peter, deliberately, "to let you wait on me, when all in life I want is the chance to serve you — all my life."

"It would be a very poor partnership," said Shirley, in a half-whisper, after a minute — and Peter's heart stopped beating — "if the serving were all on one side" — and Peter's heart went thumping on again, though not in proper rhythm.

"Partnership! *Is* it a partnership, Shirley?"

She nodded. But she moved three steps out of reach. Peter made a hasty movement, and both crutches slipped down to the floor with a crash, and slid away off the edge of the porch to the ground. Peter glared after them. Then he looked at Shirley, standing there, rose-cheeked, her tear-wet eyes now full of laughter.

"Oh, *please* get them for me, dear!" he pleaded. "Or — no — never mind the crutches! Just — *come here!*"

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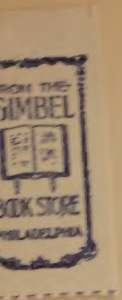

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